

Instruction: Mindfulness of Breathing

Gil Fronsdal

March 02, 2026

Keywords: bhāvanā, Pāli, mettā, jhāna, Buddha, mindfulness, breath meditation, subject-object distinction, awareness, retreat

Each morning at this time, we'll offer instructions in the practice. And the instruction over retreat is progressive, so it often starts pretty basic and simple, and then we expand it from there each day. And now the core aspect of the practice is that just notice what's happening. It's... And to say it that simply is actually a pretty good thing to remember. It's really simple what we're doing, even though as we go along it might seem like it gets more complicated. And some of what we say for the instructions might be similar to prose writing, and some of it might be maybe, if it's not too much to say, it's more like poetry.

And sometimes what I mean by that is sometimes we explain a little bit at the beginning, and sometimes we then offer the instructions in the form of guided meditation. So it's like two different modes. And then for today, I'll start a little bit with the explanation first, and then we'll do the guided part. There's this kind of idea I tried to get across just last night about... Say it a little differently, there's the subjective being aware, how we know subjectively what's happening, and there's the object of what we know. So for example, it could be the breathing. We know that we're breathing is the object of attention, and the knowing of the breathing, the feeling of it, is more a subjective part.

So there's a subject-object distinction. But in between there, there's a resonance. In between there, there's something that happens in the nature of awareness, the nature of contact, the nature of the richness of what's happening. That's also very important. And what happens in between there is one of the interesting questions that might help you appreciate there's more going on here. So you don't get caught too much in the subject-object distinction.

You don't have to do too much of that. And sometimes the practice becomes a technique. And techniques are kind of, I don't know, I don't like the idea of mindfulness being a technique. And to call it a practice is okay. That's what English-speaking people say. But if you

ask someone, what is your practice, they might say it's to... My practice is breath meditation.

My practice is mindfulness. My practice is *mettā*. My practice is... There's all concentration practice, *jhāna* practice. And you get kind of answers like that. But in ancient language, in *Pāli*, the word that we're translating as practice, *bhāvanā*, literally means to grow, to cultivate, and so you get a very different answer, or it's a very different question.

Do not ask what is your practice, but ask, what are you growing? What are you growing? And I think sometimes when I'm asked that question, I kind of go, I kind of almost like I look inside to feel and sense where growth would happen. Where does growth happen? Where does change happen? Where does the resonance happen?

Where does the way that we're touched and changed by it all, where does that happen? When we sit with a sense of wonder, the sunset over the ocean, what grows in us? What opens? What resonates? Where does that kind of more wide resonance affect us? It's not, doesn't it, not in that hard and fast subject-object relationship with the sunset.

It lives someplace else in us. And so also if you have a sense of wonder with or amazement at this vast, wonderful inner nature that we are, where does that wonder? Where does that sense of awe live or mystery or openness or... What is it that's touched and changed by how we're aware of it in this kind of way? So there's more going on here in practice than what can happen in just knowing something and even just feeling it in some kind of technique way.

So in the teachings of the Buddha, whenever he was going to teach some form of mindfulness, he always began with three... activities that we do. We know, we feel, and we relax. And he began always with the breathing. When one becomes established with presence, with attention in the breathing. And this language of becoming established or rooted or grounded in the body's experience of breathing, probably each of us would have a different kind of reference point for that.

But it's a reference point of a certain intimacy, a certain stability here in this body, from the inside out. And then with that established, then we would know very simply that we're breathing, that we're breathing in and we're breathing out. And the simplicity of that is, is so important. One way I like to describe it is the way we know that we're breathing is approaching doing nothing. It's that light that's, maybe not initially, maybe we have to make more effort, but we're approaching some way, we're almost doing nothing, just the natural ways in which we know. We're left with that.

Naturally knowing, breathing, and then, as we know the breath, as we're present for it, then

the Buddha says, feel the whole body. And in a way that I like to describe that, another way is, know it with all of yourself. Know the experience of breathing with all of who you are, including all the senses, all the ways in which you feel. And it is an invitation to step out of the cognitive mind, the thinking mind, the figuring out mind, the judging mind, the expecting mind, to really allow yourself just the whole body to feel the experience of breathing. And in doing that, you might notice that you're tense, that you're somehow tight in some muscles.

And then the Buddha says, relax. Relax. As you breathe in, relax. That meant the physical tightness, the ways we're held. As you breathe out, relax. And this is meant to be a whole kind of ecosystem, a kind of whole being, way of being with oneself.

To know, to feel, to relax, relax into oneself. So to assume a meditation posture that's appropriate for you. A posture that includes some balance between being alert in the posture and being relaxed. Sometimes it's useful to emphasize the alertness. Sometimes it's useful to emphasize the relaxing. And as you're sitting here, might there be some way to feel within you some physical stability.

Where in your body might there be some stability? Maybe in the contact with the cushion, chair, mat, how your weight is received. Maybe somewhere in the torso, lower torso, belly, near the bottom of the spine. Maybe there's some feeling of stability throughout your whole body, even while at the same time there's some places that feel unstable. And for now, feel the stability. And within your body, as part of your body, gently know your body breathing.

Know the movements of the body. Know how the torso moves differently, different parts, in response to the breathing. Recognize where the sensations of breathing are easiest to feel and to know. Sometimes in the belly, sometimes the chest, sometimes the nostrils. Sometimes it's easiest and nicest to feel it where it's strongest. Sometimes it's nicest to feel it where it's subtle.

The movements of the back rib cage. We can know that we're breathing, know we're breathing in, know we're breathing out with a very light touch. And it's also possible to physically feel the sensations of breathing, whereas knowing is more of a mental activity. Sensing is more physical. And as you breathe, the sensations of breathing in are different than the sensations of breathing out. How do they differ for you?

Sometimes it's easier to stay with a knowing of breath. Sometimes it's easier to stay with a sensing of it. And sometimes knowing and sensing work together nicely as part of the bringing all of ourselves to be in our direct experience. And then to relax the body as you exhale, softening the body. Or if tension doesn't relax, that's okay. Maybe taking a few breaths to

soften around it, allowing it to be there.

As you exhale, softening the thinking mind, the tension or pressure maybe in the head associated with thinking, softening and quieting the thinking mind. If your mind wanders away in thought, when you eventually notice that, that noticing is a natural wonder. It's amazing to wake up and to know. And then allow breathing to come back into awareness. Knowing the quality of your breathing, sensing how the body experiences breathing, where knowing, sensing and relaxing might open the awareness to be whole. Your whole being is aware as you exhale, relaxing any forcefulness or tightness in how you're aware, how you're practicing.

As you relax, maybe it's a softening, the edges of your awareness. So you can be more like gazing across the ocean, the horizon, sunset. Not trying to see anything, but open to it all. And then in the last minute or so of the sitting, how is it to be aware in the present moment when you make no effort to do so? Let go of your thoughts. Let go and see what it's like to be aware when you're not doing the awareness.

I've found it helpful for myself and maybe for you to... Consider that there are only two types of meditation practitioners. They're the beginners, and they are the experienced beginners. No other. And everyone's a beginner. And we spend a lot of time being beginners.

And the first day of retreat is often a time to remember to be a gracious beginner. The first day of a retreat for many people... It is, you wouldn't have come if you got the, if this is how we publicize it, what would happen? People are often very tired. They're surprised how much their body aches. They're surprised by how busy their mind is.

They're surprised by the unexpected emotions who come. And sometimes it's all of the above. And surprised by restlessness. Yeah. I think a big part of the teacher's job is to normalize this. It's okay.

And so find a way to be gracious with it, but try not to be critical or upset or come to great conclusions about anything. Just, oh, I'm tired. Oh, my body hurts. You're welcome to change your posture at any time in the hall when you're meditating. Okay. You're welcome to stand, do standing meditation, if that would help you, anytime.

And you're welcome to open your eyes if it feels like it's getting a little bit emotionally intense in there. And maybe look around. So some of you have nice views of the window. I sometimes open my eyes here and look at the window. It's nice. The...

And it's usually best at the beginning of a retreat to not take too much responsibility for what's happening. You have to really offer yourself to the practice. You have to show up. And that's like the key ingredient. It just keeps showing up, keeps noticing. But don't be measuring.

How am I doing? Am I there yet? I shouldn't be thinking. I should be different. We're on a journey. The retreat's a journey.

And you'll be on the journey, whether you want it or not. And it's going to unfold over these days. And just being at a retreat center, being in this place where there's not a lot of the social interactions we normally would have and talking and looking at screens and news and all kinds of things. Just being here, something begins to shift and change. And you'll find yourself changing over these next days and... So I'd encourage you to trust that process.

If you need to take a break today, please do. If you need to nap during the day, please do. So certainly take care of yourself. But be careful you don't take care of yourself too much. That you kind of overdo the kind of... Because you want to kind of stay close in enough to allow this natural transformation that's going to happen, just being here.

Yeah. And it works a little bit faster if you learn the art of leaving yourself alone. If you learn the art of not being so caught in the thoughts about me, myself, and mine, and what am I doing, which kind of is usually a place where things can get very contracted and narrow. And if anything, we're going to learn to recognize that, to see the contractedness, and breathe with it, feel it, sense it, breathe with it, relax with it. And we'll find our way.