

Guided Meditation: Stilling the Breath

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So hello, everyone, and nice to be back. Even though there's a lot of this setting up for YouTube here, with all the technology that has to be turned on just right. In some ways, it's easier maybe to just use the laptop straight. But we have a whole sound system and technology for Audio Dharma and recording, and it involves lots of volunteers. And so they use the whole system here at IMC.

So I just came back from teaching a retreat at IRC. It was wonderful to be there, and in some ways, I carry it still with me. And so we'll begin maybe a simple meditation today, but in a little unusual way. It's not meant to be a big technique, but it's something that might occasionally be useful for you.

And that is, at the beginning of a sitting, just a few times, when you breathe in, hold your breath before you breathe out, and really use that because the strong urge to exhale is there. Let that bring you into your body more, so your thoughts about other places, other times, and the mind that wanders off, that's ruminating, kind of begin to quiet down because now something important is happening: you have to breathe. Don't hold your breath for long, but just enough to get that sense of being gathered, coming here. Occasionally, if you stop just on the top of the inhale, you might actually feel an urge to breathe in even a little bit more. And if that happens, maybe give into it and hold for a few seconds more. Just feel the body, feel what's going on.

And we'll do that for a few breaths, and then do the same with the exhale. Breathe out, just a natural exhale, and don't breathe in. Just hold it there. And sometimes you might feel that, by holding and feeling your body, something in your body begins to settle, begins to relax. Even though you might have the desire to breathe in, something relaxes, just in that full-body tuning in. And sometimes, when you hold the breath, you can feel that there's more room to exhale further. And after a while, letting go, relaxing in the body, allows for a deeper exhale.

So this is not meant to make you winded or, you know, put you up against some kind of place where you're worried about breathing in or get anxious. Just a little bit, as a way of gathering yourself, as a ritual of being here now, in this body, in this breath, at this time.

So, to begin by assuming a posture that's adjusted in some way to support you to be alert. The positioning of your hands, your arms—that somehow expresses that you'll be here now. If the hands are just casually put down in front of you and held together, perhaps maybe you can put them on your thighs. Sometimes hands down on the thighs is an expression of being here and being alert and being ready. And if it's comfortable for you, gently close your eyes.

And before we do this breath exercise, you might take just a few deeper, fuller breaths—comfortably fuller—and relax on the exhale. Then let your breathing return to normal. No special effort to breathe any special way. Just take a few breaths to check in with your breathing. Just get to know how it is. To the best of your ability, not to be troubled or think it should be different. Just kind of saying hello to your body breathing.

And then, without breathing deeper or fuller, when you get to the top of the inhale, don't breathe out. Just hold it there for a little bit, and let that be an occasion for feeling more connected to your body, and then release. Maybe do that two or three times. And then do it a few more times, but this time, as you hold your inhale at the top, feel your body. See if there's some way that the body can relax and settle before you exhale. And then exhale and relax more.

Holding at the top of the inhale is kind of like having a firm column around which everything attached to the column can hang freely and relax: the shoulders, the arms, the torso, the rib cage, the belly. And then take a few normal breaths, and don't hold your inhale anymore. And then exhale in a normal way, nothing special. And at the end of the exhale, hold off from breathing in. Hold your breath, in a sense. Again, to feel your body more fully—not very long, not to get tense or stressed by this. Just a little bit to feel your body more fully.

Think that holding your breath is like an invitation to feel your body more fully. And if something with your body wants to relax, relax at the end of the out-breath and that held breath. Maybe in a way that has the exhale continue a bit on its own. And then three times, breathe three more times with a holding at the end of the inhale and the end of the exhale. Make sure it's not too long, but use it as a way of feeling and maybe relaxing your body more fully, settling into your body, out of your thoughts, into your body.

And now, no longer do this exercise, and begin sitting here, meditating on your own breath-

ing body. Maybe there's a natural settling into the body and breathing that calls on your attention to be here now with this experience. What would it be like for you to trust the body breathing, the breathing that the body does? Whatever it might be, it's okay. Relax into it. Open up. Allow it. Feel it. Accompany your breathing as it is.

And as we come to the end of this breathing, to begin, to end how we began. At the end of the inhale, stop for a moment. Don't breathe out. But now, after stopping for a moment and feeling that the lungs are full, they're open, they're expanded, then breathe in a little bit more. Continue this opening, expanding, filling movement of the lungs. Do it a few times.

With each time that you keep expanding your inhale, you're opening up with a big yes to the wider world. Yes, in being present, being attentive, being here to meet the day. And then let the breathing return to normal, but continue with an orientation now directed outward into the world. And as you breathe in and breathe out, imagine that you're accompanying the world with a presence and attention that is medicine for the world. If you're alarmed or upset or filled with desires, opinions, and views, you might not be the medicine that the world needs. But if you accompany it with simple awareness, kindness, presence, willingness to see everyone with care, maybe then your attention is medicine.

May this meditation that we do teach us to step into the world as medicine. Step into the world without our anger, despair, desires, conceit, but step into the world with care and love and kindness. You never know who you will disarm if you treat them with kindness and friendliness.

May all beings be happy. May all beings be safe. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings be free. Thank you.