

Guided Meditation: Stepping Stones of Breath

Gil Fronsdal

October 29, 2026

Keywords: mindfulness meditation, breathing, inhale, exhale, continuity, stillness, goodwill, generosity of spirit, meditation posture

So hello and welcome to our meditation. I think this week I feel particularly quiet coming to sit to meditate here. I think a lot has to do with having been on retreat last week.

So, as an introduction to this meditation, there's an interesting alternation in mindfulness meditation between inconsistency and change, and stillness or constancy. When the thinking mind is busy, it's easy to have some idea that some things are constant, unchanging. When the thinking mind is quiet, it's easier to see how much is constantly shifting and changing.

So if we're sitting down to meditate with a mind that's thinking a lot, and we have the idea that we're going to stay continuously, constantly, with the breathing, that's the idea. That's the expectation, but the thinking mind makes it hard to do that. We've constructed the idea of continuity, but the idea becomes more like a tightrope. We keep slipping off because the continuity we have in mind with breathing, for example, is really an abstraction, a construct.

So if you have the idea, "I'm going to be aware of my breathing the whole meditation non-stop," that kind of idea of breathing is an abstract. It's not like a thing. It's like saying, "I'm going to be aware. I'm going to be really aware of the week." We're in the middle of a week, or coming to the end of a week, seven days, and I'm going to really pay attention to the week.

It's a very strange thing to say because the week doesn't exist as something tangible, something you can point to or feel or touch. It's a construct of the mind, something humans have created, and there could be other ways of dividing up the year, as they do in Zen monasteries, where they have a five-day week. It's a very different feeling of it all, and it's kind of out of sync with the seven-day week that most of us have.

So it's not a tangible thing. So the word breathing is not exactly a tangible thing for the sake of continuity. You can't quite touch it in the ongoing way to stay constant with it. And what we want to do in mindfulness is to be concrete, to land on something, really feel something.

And so, it's more useful, I think, to not be aware of breathing, but to be aware of an inhale. Be aware of an exhale. And rather than walking on a tightrope that we fall off easily, the breaths—the inhales—are like stepping stones that we can step on, sit down, and—

And so there, the continuity is not constant, constant flow like a river that's constantly flowing. But it's more like we renew the attention with every inhale and every exhale: stepping, breathing, inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale. And so we can be continuously aware for the duration of the inhale without any expectation of something longer, more continuous. And then we do it again for the exhale.

And there's a gentle rhythm of attention being established, landing on the stepping stone of inhale, and then to the next one, stepping on exhale. And the inhale is let go of entirely; the stepping stone we've been on disappears in awareness because we're walking forward. And, you know, the inhale disappears anyway; it's no longer there during the exhale.

So these stepping stones, and as we go through the meditation today, maybe that's the continuity—the continuity of stepping on the inhale, exhale. The awareness lands. The awareness connects. Inhale for the duration of the inhale, and that's enough. And then it repeats with the exhale for the duration of the exhale.

Nothing more ambitious. No attempt to try to have any more continuity with the breathing than for one inhale, one exhale. That's concrete. That's specific. Here, now.

So assuming a meditation posture. Taking some larger breaths and relaxing on the exhale. And letting your breathing return to normal.

And here, now, slowly, steadily, ease yourself into the inhale, the exhale. Don't be in a hurry, but have a sense that this is where you're going. You're going to meet and be present to feel this inhale. Just that. That's all.

And then this exhale, nothing more, nothing less. Each inhale is the complete meditation. Just stay with that, letting the thinking mind become quieter. So there's a fuller feeling of connecting, being with the inhale, being with the exhale, here and now.

Oh. As we come to the end of this sitting, with the same care that you might have used for connecting with inhales and exhales, or maybe with a greater care, turn your thoughts outward to the people in your community. Your household, or the neighbors, or the town, the

wider territory you're in, out across the lands.

And somehow the combination of sitting in your meditation—maybe quiet, maybe calm, maybe still—together with awareness of the wider world. And holding the two together, the world with all its activities and actions and joys and sorrows, and your subtleness, your meditation posture, your being here—maybe rooted in your body and your breathing—in yourself. Both together: the wider world and yourself in meditation.

And from yourself, from your meditation, from deep inside, give rise to some wish, some well-wishing for the world around you. Some generosity of spirit, of kindness, some goodwill. Maybe you have your own words to give expression to your own well-wishing, goodwill. I'll offer mine, and you can go along or you can offer your own to yourself from yourself.

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

And may that possibility, in a small way—however small it might be—begin with how each of us goes out into the world. May our meditation guide us, teach us how to enter the world with goodwill and friendliness. Thank you.