

# Dharmette: Being with the Breath

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on October 6, 2010

For many people, breathing can be a wonderful focal point for mindfulness practice and concentration practice. Giving attention to breathing, learning about how we breathe, what goes on when we breathe, and aspects of our breathing, is a wonderful way of learning about ourselves, how to monitor ourselves, and how to adjust ourselves to get along better in this world.

I think of mindfulness of breathing as the great lubricator. If we can stay in touch with our breath, it lubricates our efforts through life. For example, it's very hard to keep the breath tense or tight or held if you're paying attention to it. And if our breath is not being held, then we tend to be a little bit more at ease as we go through our life. It's harder to get worked up; it's harder to get caught in anger or resentment. To come back to the breath and be familiar with it, to be in touch with it often, and to make that a habit, so that throughout the day you're dropping back into the breath – for many people, this is a great support in their lives.

Occasionally, there are people for whom focusing on the breath does not work. It's even counter-indicated sometimes. There are other ways of doing meditation or mindfulness practice that don't keep the breath at the center. But generally, for most people, it works, so I'm going to talk a little more about it today.

One of the things that I find fun about the English language, is that the phrase “spiritual inspiration” has the word ‘breath’ in both words. Respire, respiration. One of the meanings of the Latin the word *spiritus* is ‘to breathe.’ It also means ‘spirit,’ but ‘respiration’ has the word in it, as does ‘inspiration,’ as does ‘spiritual.’ They have the same Latin root. So ‘spiritual inspiration’ requires a lot of breathing. It calls us back to our breath.

Paying attention to the breath, bringing attention to the breath – there are a variety of ways of doing it. I recommend that we find a way to go inside the experience of breathing, as opposed to being up in the control tower in the head, watching it. One way to do that is to feel it rather than watch it. And, in fact, I try to avoid language of watching when I talk about being with the breath. I'll talk about feeling the breath, being with the breath, or experiencing the breath, rather than looking at the breath, because I find that looking at it tends to create a separation. As the looker, you can easily get tense, or be separated from your experience in a way that's not helpful. But the language of feeling and sensing, puts you more in touch with it.

I like to encourage people to experience the breath, to notice how the body experiences breathing. It's not a matter of you experiencing the breathing. It's a matter for you to notice how the body experiences it, because the way we sense something is through the body. We sense the experience of breathing and how the breathing affects our torso, our diaphragm, our belly, our shoulders. When we feel the front ribcage rise or expand outwards, we experience that in the area of the ribcage. We might know it cognitively, perhaps, in our thinking mind, but the sensing experience is in the body itself. Noticing how the body senses it, how it experiences it, puts you more in touch with the direct experience.

Then become familiar with that. Spend time getting to know what your breathing is like. Find out what it's like in different situations: how it changes depending on your mood, your emotions, your reactions, what activity you're doing, so that you are familiar with a wide range of ways the breath is experienced.

You can start noticing changes that occur in your breathing, because the changes are indicative of something interesting to know. For example, you get into your car to drive and your breath is relaxed and fluid, and then after a while you notice your breath is a little bit held. That might be an interesting indication that you're actually in a little bit of a hurry, or impatient with your driving. It might be the first indication you have that maybe it would be useful to relax. Maybe you can drive in a more easeful way. It helps everyone else's driving if you can be a little bit more relaxed and calm as you drive. That's a little example of how you might be able to use your breathing to help you understand where you're at.

I often check into my breath throughout the day, and there are plenty of times where my first indication of how I'm feeling is by what's going on with my breathing. It's like an early warning sign: “Pay attention to this, Gil; you need to notice this.”

Then where people notice the breathing experience, changes from person to person. It also changes in the course of the day, or in different situations. When I was in Asia, in both the Japanese and the Burmese traditions I practiced in, the encouragement was to be aware of the breathing in the belly. So I spent much of my life, tracking, and being present for my breathing in my belly, just below the belly button area. Maybe because I've done it so much, I feel very comfortable there, very familiar with it there, and it's grounding. It gives me a low center of gravity. It keeps me in touch with a place that is useful to keep soft.

In my early years of meditation, I had a very tense belly. I could relax it, but as soon as I relaxed it, it would involuntarily tense up again. It took me a long time to relax it and to soften my meditation until I had a relatively soft belly that I could keep that way. Keeping my attention really low in the belly helped with discovering that – keeping a soft approach in my stomach.

Some people prefer to be present for their breathing in their chest, and that's sometimes very comforting, feeling it around the heart area, and feeling the movement, the rhythm of rising and falling, expanding, contracting there.

Some people prefer to be present for the breath with the sensations of the air going in and out through the nostrils. There can be a little tingling, little changes of temperature, vibration as the air goes in and out. Some people like that very narrow focus of that one little place at the tip of your nose, because it gathers you together, and keeps you focused in a way that, for some people, may not happen as easily in the chest or the belly, because they are bigger areas.

I tend to prefer emphasizing feeling the breath in the torso because more of our life happens in the torso. More of our emotional life gets expressed in how we breathe in the torso. Our emotions sometimes get expressed in different places with various tensions, holdings, and loosening in our torso, shoulders, or belly. Not much happens at the tip of our nose. I suppose you could tense up there if you really wanted to. And also, for some people, the tip of the nose is so close to where they experience thinking, that it's very easy to slip back into thinking. I tend to think it's more useful to experience the breathing in the torso area. Sometimes people don't get as concentrated as quickly in the torso area, but often the concentration tends to be more relaxed and softer, than if it's at the tip of the nose.

It's interesting to hang out with the breath, get to know it, and become familiar with the difference between the experience of breathing in and the experience of breathing out. Get familiar with that difference. They're different experiences. I find that in breathing out, there's a natural letting go that happens. I like to go along with the letting go, emphasize it slightly, or use the letting go of breathing out as a way of releasing the thoughts that might have crept in – to let it go a little more fully as I breathe out. That little extra letting go as I breathe out, keeps me more connected, and less likely to wander off, and more likely to catch myself if I have wandered off, and then to come back and let go of my thoughts. For me, it allows the end of the out-breath to be more smooth and pleasant.

And then there's a teeny nanosecond of a pause at the end, before I breathe in, which allows the in-breath to happen more naturally on its own. It's a very nice feeling sometimes when the breath just appears on its own.

When I say, "Pay attention to the breath," some people find that they're controlling the breath. Some people feel, "I'm not supposed to control my breath; I'm supposed to have a natural breath." Generally in our tradition, we say, "Don't worry about that." The primary thing we're doing in Vipassanā meditation is noticing what the breath is like. If you have a controlled breath, your job is to notice what a controlled breath is like – not to judge it. You might have to become the world-class expert on what the controlled breath really feels like. What's it like to control it? What emotions go along? What beliefs go along? How you grapple with it? What is control like? What does it feel like? What part of the body gets activated in the control? Just really get present for it. That does two things. One thing is that you develop great insight, great understanding, great presence with something – in this case, controlled breathing. And the other is, that if you really get to know it well, and you're not bothered by it, but are just relaxed about it and get to know it well, it tends to give up, to let up on its own. Sooner or later, it will stop if you have that kind of focus on it. I would encourage you, if you find yourself controlling it, to be very relaxed about it and just go along, and get to know it – and then it will pass in its own time.

If you're really relaxed, an interesting phenomenon that can happen is that there can be a long pause at the end of the out-breath. Sometimes it's at the end of the in-breath, but often it's at the end of the out-breath. And if

there's a long pause, then there's a gap in what you're focusing on, what you're paying attention to, because the breath is not happening. And if you don't direct your mind onto something at that point, it's easy for your mind to wander off in thought. In our tradition, the classic instruction at this point, is to find something in your body, where your body's touching, like your legs or your hands are touching each other, or your knees are touching the floor, or your lips are touching – some place where there is contact. Then in that gap, before the in-breath comes back, go and notice that contact. So you're grounding your attention in some place in your body. If the gap is really long, you might, in a very relaxed way, move your attention between the different contact points, between the left knee and the right knee, or between the hands or the lips – so that you're always, in a gentle, relaxed way, letting the awareness take in some direct physical experience. That can be a little bit of protection from having the mind wandering off in the gap.

If you get calm enough or centered enough, another interesting thing to explore as you're breathing in and out, is staying with the in-breaths and out-breaths and noticing at what point in that cycle you are more likely to wander off in thought. Sometimes there's a real pattern. A common pattern, not universal, is that the mind is more likely to wander off during the end of the out-breath or during the out-breath. Sometimes people release their vigilance a little bit, and the thinking mind creeps in there. For some other people, it's other points in the cycle. But if you can notice that it's a regular pattern at a certain point in the cycle of the breath where mind starts to think and wander off, then you can add a little bit of extra vigilance when you come to that part in the cycle.

Just remember, "Let me just hang in there at the end of the out-breath; let me just stay a little bit extra, and then I can relax when I get to the end of the out-breath because I made it." Then do the in-breath, and then do the next thing for the out-breath so that you stay on track and don't easily wander off in thought.

The last thing I'll say is that breathing is a wonderful companion. I hope, if you give it time and get familiar with it, that you'll really come to appreciate what a wonderful companion it is to carry with you throughout the day and check in with. Being in touch with your breathing is a great support for a wise life.

Thank you.