

Mindfulness of Breathing (5) Receptive Awareness

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Gil Fronsdal

In this fifth talk on mindfulness of breathing, we're going to continue with the 16 progressive steps the Buddha taught for deepening or fulfilling the possibilities of mindfulness of breathing or breath meditation. In laying out the 16 steps, the Buddha didn't give any indication that there were going to be challenges in doing this. He was just laying out the landmarks of how the practice deepens or becomes more full as it progresses.

Of course, there are going to be challenges. Working with challenges is part of the practice of mindfulness of breathing. One of the first challenges for many of us is to just arrive in the present moment – to really be established *here*. The mind has a mind of its own. It wanders or drifts off and gets preoccupied in things so easily. When this happens, we lose intimacy with and groundedness in the present moment.

Sometimes the mind is really strong and pulls awareness off a lot. It takes what I call "manual labor" to come back to the breath – "Okay, I'm going to be in the present moment." Awareness of breathing has the benefit that it's always happening in the present moment. With awareness of breathing, there is the reoccurring rhythm of sensations in the body that are happening right now. The breath and the whole body are always available as a place to ground ourselves in the present moment.

If you're with your breathing, you're in the present moment. Without having to think, analyze, and figure out where your attention is supposed to be, the idea is to have a default: "Oh, I'll be in the present moment *here* with this."

It's also helpful to have a default place in the body where you pay attention to breathing. I call it "home base." For me, it's often the movements of the belly, but sometimes it switches to the chest. Very occasionally, it's the breath sensations in the nostrils. Sometimes the whole body feels like a bellows, and the whole body is kind of the default place. It can be any of those places and more.

Generally the default sensation for me is the belly – just feeling the movements of the belly as I practice breathing. Sometimes it feels like manual labor to remind myself to come back to the sensations in my belly over and over again. I may not have a lot of success in staying there with the sensations, but I just keep coming back to them. Eventually, the energy of thinking or being distracted begins to quiet down, partly because I'm not feeding it anymore. I'm actually feeding being with the breathing.

At some point, there's a switch, and sometimes I don't see when that switch happens: "Okay, now I'm established. Now I'm much more *here*, and present, and I can just stay here." That switch to really being present can be progressive, like little quantum leaps. We're somewhat present, and then a little more present, and then even more present – until it feels like we're really well established *here*, and the mind has very little tendency to wander off.

Sometimes the mind begins to wander off, and because you're right *there* – so alert and present – you notice the mind beginning to wander off. It's almost like there's a rubber band attached to your thoughts. As it gets too stretched, you notice the sensation of that, and then everything comes back into the present, *here*.

What we're working with is developing this capacity to be present, and it takes a lot of repetition. There's a tremendous amount of repetition – coming back and starting over. One of the real keys to making this repetition work and take off for us is if we adopt a pleasant approach each time we start over. When the mind wanders off, it's very easy to be upset or aversive to the fact that we have wandered off, and then jerk the mind back or

pounce back on the breath. But there should be no pouncing or jerking – nothing violent. The whole process can be relaxed.

Clearly, definitively, we begin again. I like the expression, "begin again" as opposed to the expression, "come back to the breath," which is almost like we have to move and do something. To begin again does not suggest movement, but just, "Oh, here I am, and I'll begin again."

We begin again in a pleasant, relaxed, and enjoyable way. With time, you enjoy it more than you enjoy wandering off into thought. It's a delightful thing to come back and be here. It takes some practice and some experimenting with, "How do I show up here?" Once you're with the breathing, you find there is a time and season for every way of being in meditation. There's not just one way.

The idea that in order to be in the present moment we're supposed to have a laser focus, and hold on tight, and strain to be with the breath is usually counterproductive. More often than not, it's more useful to be receptive, open, and allowing – to *receive* the breath. But don't do it too casually. We don't want to be relaxed and complacent, or relaxed and lackadaisical. The art of it is to be both relaxed, at ease, receptive, *and* have a sense of commitment to it. To be present with a sense of, "This is what I want to do. I'm established *here*."

The language of the Buddha is to have awareness established so it can be receptive – receptive so it can be established. This is all to say that *how* we're aware is part of the practice of mindfulness of breathing. It's not just about being with the breath. It's *how* we are with the breath. This interface between awareness and breathing is something we're cultivating, developing, and working with.

The place where we can adjust the most is *how* we are aware. We are learning to monitor the nature of attention and the nature of how we're meditating, so how we do it is pleasant, enjoyable, and useful. With this approach, it's the *how* that suggests we're in it for the long term. If how we're meditating is somehow unpleasant, harsh, judgmental, self-critical, or straining, then probably it is not going to be very satisfying in the long term.

So to settle in *here* with the breathing. Of course, there are a lot of things that are going to be challenging. There could be strong emotions, strong sensations, pain in the body, strong bouts of thinking, or loud noises around us. When meditation practice is really founded on and based in breathing, one of the things we can do is acknowledge that these challenges are happening. And breathe with them or breathe through them. So we're certainly attending to these challenges – knowing they're there – and we're developing the practice with mindfulness. But rather than being focused only on the challenges, we're also aware of the breathing – breathing through it or, breathing with it.

For example, there might be strong knee pain. One of the instructions of mindfulness is to bring your attention to the pain itself, and hold your attention on the pain for however long it's compelling. Because the sensation of pain can be relatively strong and at first appears constant, it's hard for the mind to not get caught, or strain, or become tight, or slip off too easily into thought. But if you can feel the pain in the knee, and breathe through it, or breathe with it, then the breathing kind of massages the mind. It's like the breath is gently stroking the pain – staying there, feeling it, and being with it.

There's something about breathing with pain – or breathing through it – that relaxes the micro-muscles or maybe encourages the blood flow in the area of the discomfort. Often this seems to change our relationship to the pain, and tends to make it feel a lot more manageable and easier to breathe with.

Practicing mindfulness of breathing is also a way of developing more continuity with the breath – making it a habit to be with the breath. The breath is always here. So when there are physical or emotional difficulties, breathe with them. Breathe through them. Whatever is going on, we're trying to develop this capacity to be regularly in touch with breathing, so that it becomes a habit, more like second nature.

So as you go about your day, one option is to begin tuning into your breathing in daily life. Make it more of a habit throughout the day to check in with your breath or to be with your breathing. You might find there are all kinds of small ways in daily life where that's easy to do. If you're driving and you come to a red light, check in with your breathing. If you're standing in line in a store, check in with your breathing rather than reading the magazines that might be there. Notice how your breathing shifts and changes – how it's being held, how it's contracted or tight, how free it is, or how loose it is.

There are multiple benefits with mindfulness of breathing. The more you do it, the more those benefits will come your way. So establishing mindfulness here and now, and then becoming aware of the sensations of breathing –

the experience of breathing, as it comes and goes, comes and goes. This is the beginning of the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati*.

Thank you, and I look forward to continuing this on Monday.