

# Mindfulness of Breathing (7) Breathing and Mind

January 12, 2021

## Summary Keywords

breathing, mind, body, mindfulness, breath, experience, tense, intimacy, Dharma, calm, belly, *ānāpānasati*, *kāya*, breath body, reciprocal, mutuality

## Gil Fronsdal

I think it's easy to spend much of your daily life not attending to breathing – not noticing it much. It can seem pretty inconsequential in some ways when we take it for granted. It may not have much importance compared to the important things we're thinking about, imagining, and doing.

Maybe we can think of breathing as something very humble. It is there to constantly support us, but maybe it doesn't want to have a lot of attention. Even so, the more we're aware of and sensitive to breathing, the more we have access to all this information about ourselves.

One part of that information is how we hold the breath in check – where there's resistance in the breath. We're holding the breath and not breathing in, not exhaling properly, breathing only partially, or other parts of the body are being held tight. The belly is tight, and we're mostly doing chest breathing. There are all kinds of things that may be subtle – but subtle because they also indicate the state of our minds. Because of this, they're quite valuable to see and know.

There's a reciprocal relationship that as the mind gets tense, the breathing can get tense. For example, when the body or the whole system is tense – if we relax the breathing and return to the breathing – the rest of 'us' can sometimes become less tense. This wonderful intimacy with breathing is beneficial in so many ways.

The third step of *ānāpānasati* – the 16 steps that the Buddha gave for mindfulness of breathing – is to train oneself to experience the whole body as we breathe in, and the whole body as we breathe out. As I said yesterday, one of the meanings or interpretations of this is it refers to the "breath body" – the full scope of how much the body participates in the experience of breathing.

What's interesting about the word for 'body' – *kāya* in Pali – is that it seems to be used in a particular way. It can mean 'body,' but there are other words for the physical body that are more related to the physical body than the word *kāya*. The way that the word *kāya* is used – I can make a fun wordplay here if you allow me – it's easy enough to say that our body is not what we think about. The body is not what we think it is. Because whatever we think the body is, that is probably limited and not really the full scope of what the body is.

My interpretation of what the Buddha would say is similar to that. But it goes one step more, which makes it a bit of a paradox, irony, or a mind-twisting statement. The body is not what we *think* it is, because it *is* what we think it is. There are two levels here. The body – whatever it is – is not our surface thoughts, ideas, or interpretations that we live in. With the word *kāya*, the body is very much influenced by what we think, the attitudes we have, and the mind states we have. So *kāya* – the breath body that we're focusing on here – is that *experience* we have of the body. It is malleable and shaped by how our mind operates.

There are many levels in which that mutuality and inter-relationship exists. If the mind gets tense, then the breathing gets held tight. If we have all kinds of attitudes, motivations, and activities that are generated from the mind, that will have an influence on how we breathe. As the mind gets calmer in meditation, the breath body becomes calmer. As the mind gets stiller and less activated by a lot of thoughts and ideas, and it gets more subtle, the breathing becomes more subtle.

It's fascinating to sit and get very quiet and calm in meditation, and then out of the blue – through no choice of your own – the mind suddenly thinks about a conflict that you had with someone 25 years ago. Suddenly you feel a surge of anger about how you were treated. Now your breathing changes. Your breathing was soft,

relaxed, and at ease – and suddenly, the breathing, the body, the chest, the diaphragm, the belly – everything gets tightened up. The breathing is now limited, tight, and maybe speeded up.

So what happens in the mind – what we think – *does* have a big influence on our body, our breath body. Part of what can make mindfulness of breathing so interesting and valuable is because the breathing we experience – and the operating word is ‘experience’ – what we perceive, we’re experiencing it through the filter of the mind. What we’re experiencing is very much influenced by the state of the mind.

The breathing is a doorway or a channel to the mind. In a sense, as we’re watching the breathing, we’re also watching the mind with the breathing. It isn’t that we’re ignoring the mind by focusing on the physical sensations of breathing. They’re not just pure physical sensations. Rather, the breathing is so intimately connected to the state of the mind, that we’re actually having a window into the mind as we breathe. It doesn’t have to be a window where we constantly think and imagine, “What am I seeing in the mind?” But it’s almost like the mind and body in relationship to breathing are not that separate from each other.

As we develop more mindfulness of breathing and concentration with breathing, that very concentration and mindfulness is part of the mind that begins to shift and change. That shift and change then changes the breathing – which changes how we focus on the breathing, which changes the mind. As the mind changes, it changes how we focus on breathing – how we’re present for it. So step by step – or spiral by spiral – there is a deeper and deeper connection to breathing.

Part of what eventually makes mindfulness of breathing very engaging and absorbing can’t be understood by someone who thinks that breathing is just a physical, mechanical thing. There is this intimacy between mind and body, and how connected they are. As we get really absorbed in breathing, something shifts and changes in the mind. And vice versa. To have this reciprocity go really deep – this intimacy, closeness, and actually a lot of goodness, and a lot of beauty. A lot of wonderfulness arises from this because of this close connection between the mind and the body.

I’m hoping you don’t hear this and now strain, search, or strive to see and expect it to be just this way. Mindfulness of breathing takes a tremendous amount of patience, willingness, allowing, humility, and openness. No hurry, not straining, and not trying to experience what I’m pointing to automatically.

I’m hoping what I teach today about this connection between mind and body will inspire you to be more patient, accepting, humble, and interested. “Okay, I’m just here. I’m here for the ride. I’m here to ride the breaths coming and going. I’m here to let the breathing reveal itself to me. I’m here to allow the Dharma to show itself to me when the Dharma is ready. I’m just here doing my small piece – really trying to stay familiar, intimate, and connected to the breathing – trusting the breathing.”

Some people might find that it’s useful to ride the waves of expansion and contraction, as I suggested in the guided meditation about the whole breath body. Some might find that it helps them become more familiar with the territory of breathing. They might find that it helps them remain rooted in their home base, if they have one: the belly, chest, nostrils, or something else.

As you go about your day, continue being a student of your breathing in daily life. Notice all the shifts and changes that happen to your breathing, depending upon the activities you’re doing, the conversations you’re having, and the emotions you’re having. Become more and more curious. Figure out some way to have a regular check-in with yourself through the day. Maybe have a timer go off regularly, “Oh, I’m breathing like this. No, it’s like this.” Cultivate more and more familiarity with breathing. Make it a habit.

Thank you for today, and happy breathing to all of you.