

2020-08-24 Mindfulness of Breathing (1 of 7)

Intro to Breathing

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So my greetings to all of you. And to introduce the theme for this week, it's going to be mindfulness of breathing. And I had this idea over the next few weeks to cover some of the basics of mindfulness meditation. And basics doesn't necessarily mean that it's just introductory for people who are new. The basics are central and important for people with practice for a long time and sometimes going back to basics as a way of, of really allowing the practice to grow and deepen, even for experienced practitioners. And for this week, I'll do seven days on this theme, so we'll go continue through Saturday and Sunday as well, here in California at 7am. So seven days on different aspects of breathing and different ways of focusing on it, or understanding or benefiting from it.

Breathing is one of the, as I said earlier, one of the really core practices of all of Buddhism and that some emphasis on breathing is for meditation is kind of probably the most popular form of, most common form of, Buddhist meditation practice. It goes back to the time of the Buddha, where the only meditation practice that the Buddha, I think, really referred to as, as the meditation that he did. It was anapansati, it was mindfulness of breathing in and breathing out. He sometimes went off on retreat into the forest for a couple of weeks or a month at a time. And he would tell people that what he was practicing there was mindfulness of breathing. And one of the most detailed instructions for meditation that survived from that time is a meditation practice called anapanasati, the 16 stages 16 areas of approaches of mindfulness of breathing.

The breathing is kind of like sits at the nexus, the crossroads of all these different parts of our lives. They have to do with our emotional lives as our emotional life shifts and change, so does our breathing. It has to do with how we respond and react to the world around us. That our breathing responds accordingly. If we feel afraid, kind of go into a fight or flight mode, the breathing adjusts itself

or changes to have the energy and the oxygen needed to really do the fight or flight. If we go into fight and flight mode, just because we're anxious in situation, we can expand a tremendous amount of energy. But also if we recognize how the breathing has changed and gotten tight, maybe more chest breathing or faster or something more shallow sometimes, and to relax the way, then the fight and flight response can disappear, can relax. And we can be more present in a common useful way in situations where we don't need to fight or flight. The breathing is also interfaces with how we're thinking and what we're thinking about. It interfaces with our physiology and the changing natures of our what goes on in our bodies. And it's always always our two way streets two way directions. That as the world around us changes, the breathing changes, as we change the breathing, as we relax and open to breathing, our relationship to the world can change. If we're tense, and we learn to relax through our breathing, the tension can relax as well.

The the ways in which we're trapped and caught in very strong rumination, very strong patterns of thinking. You might see that also affects how we breathe, that sometimes we hold our breathing if we're really gripped by certain kinds of thoughts and ideas. But as we kind of relax our body and relax the breathing, the mental grip around certain thoughts begins to relax as well. There's this crossroads, fascinating place to be and if you sit at the crossroads or breathing, it's a vantage point from which to see so many different aspects of our lives come into play. If you want to really study your life, from one vantage point and be able to see like just the widest range of who you are and what goes on in your relationship to the world. Probably nothing's better than just really sitting there with breathing and watching the breath goes on and so doorway to understand so much.

So of course breathing is not always easy to focus mindfulness on breathing. And so it can take a while to learn how to breathe. And there's this wonderful story of Gurdjieff, spiritual teacher in the beginning of the 20th century, who went I think, to places like Pakistan to study with, deep in the mountains with Sufi masters, these Sufi Islamic mystics, and he showed up to see his teacher and teacher said while you're here? And Gurdjieff said, I'm here to learn how to breathe. At which point the teacher apparently laughed quite a bit. And then Gurdjieff says, and then for the next years, he taught him how to breathe You know, most of us know how to breathe. But to really learn how to have this relaxed breath and open breath, to really feel at home in our breathing is something that I didn't discover until I was about 20. I lived a life that was very peaceful and very nice, rural life for a while living on a farm, and the physical work of farming, the physical work of being outside a lot. And I discovered feelings of how breathing and natural relaxed easy way that I wasn't, I couldn't remember ever having had before. And it showed me what was possible. And then with as I learned to meditate, that that capacity for natural breathing came back, I'd probably come back easier because of the experience I had on the farm. And this idea of really discovering ease with the breath. And in the Buddha's language, the word for assurance means is the same word as to breathe easily. And to have this easy breath to breathe easily and discover really, how wonderful it is to rest and be with an easy breath all through the day. One of the great benefits I feel from the years I've done of meditation practice is to really be in touch my my breathing much of the day, it's kind of like almost automatic for

me much of the time that I'm part of my attention is there where what goes on with my breathing. And it's a early warning system for me I can start noticing when how my breathing is and how it changes is an indication how my mood is changing my mind my intentions, what I want, what I'm trying to do all kinds of things. In it isn't that I always feel like I have to stay keep a relaxed breath. Sometimes when I like doing physical work, like the breathing gets all kinds of ways. And last week I was backpacking and walking up some of these steep hills and this year as I would not say my breathing was relaxed, but I really enjoyed the heavy breathing the heavy work of doing it. So to not always feel like you have to have a relaxed breath, but to have the capacity to come back to that, like it's the baseline. One of the things that early that I had to learn about breathing was how much I held my belly. And I held my belly tight.

Much of the much of the day, and it was in only in meditation, I started to realize that and I would try to keep the belly relaxed. I learned very quickly I shouldn't make it the main project in meditation, but I would do it two or three times in the course of meditation practice session to relax the stomach. And sometimes it would just tighten up right away. But then over the months it was keep these periods of relax building more and more and more and that became a fantastic reference point also just relax belly because now I can see so much of what goes on when it does tighten up that I couldn't see when I was always tight. There was no variation and so there was no learning then but to have it relaxed enough to see the variation allows for a much greater learning about what goes on.

Some people will control the breathing, some people find it hard to focus on the breath, they interfere with it or they breathe too hard if they're focusing on it. Or some people have certain kinds of accidents or events happen to them earlier earlier in life that make the breathing difficult. So certainly it's possible not to use breathing as the primary focus for meditation. Some of you may already have found other things to do. However, it is valuable to give yourself a chance to try to learn about it, it takes a while just like it took a while for me to learn to have to relax the tension in my belly. It takes a while sometimes to learn how to be effectively with a breathing and relax soft way. And without controlling it and fixing it and breathing harder because we're focusing on it. And one of the ways to learn that is actually to learn that we are doing that. And that's our tendency. And once we see that tendency, then we can maybe find a way to adjust and find a way to do it. That is more relaxed and open and it takes a while, like learning to ride a bicycle. to things that I've learned about that is it sometimes it's useful to, to when I was controlling my breathing, I would go to the back ribcage and focus on the subtle movements of the back rib cage in the spine as I was breathing, because that was a place that was removed from the front where the control was, the control was more in the front where there the front of the diaphragm the chest. And by focusing on the back, I kind of pulled myself out of the area of control. And it was easier to relax with the breathing. And then when I was kind of relaxed and present, then I would kind of like was coming in through the back door sneaking in, I would sneak into the front of be with the breathing in in the front here.

The other thing that I learned it's very effective is not to be concerned about a control breath or the difficulty of breathing. And just to be very content, that what we're trying to do here, fundamentally, is just to be mindful to breathing just to be aware of breathing as it is and if its a controlled breathing, then we become the world expert on what it's like to have a controlled breathing. And that kind of attitude, that even a control breathing, uncomfortable breathing is worthy of attention and you can be relaxed about having it supports things beginning to relax and soften on its own. So we don't have to be the one who fixes it.

So that'll be the focus this week, and I'll talk to each day and some different aspects of mindfulness of breathing and how the interface interacts with all these different parts of our being and our relationship to the world. And I hope that that lays down a nice foundation for you and a reminder the foundation or kind of enhances as your meditation practice and, and how you live your life as well. So I hope that you all stay safe. I hope you all those of you in the California can stay out of the smoke as best you can and that all of you are well protected from COVID-19 and illnesses and all kinds of challenges and I hope you'll take good care of yourself and that this mindfulness of breathing, you'll take as part of the part of the way of self care. Thank you