So the topic for this series of talks is mindfulness or breathing. And partly I am doing this series as an expression of my own appreciation of attention to breathing and the tremendous value that I've had from learning how to be at home with my own body's experience of breathing. It is kind of second nature for me to attend to my breathing, notice my breathing, what's happening with my breathing, come home. And I find it phenomenally helpful as I go through the day.

Maybe representative of or an example of that is what I used to do yoga classes. One of the common expressions of my yoga teachers was something about don't hold your breathing. Don't hold your breath and I think it's fairly common for some people when they're in a difficult yoga posture, to hold their breath as they're trying so hard to do the posture. And the idea is not to hold your breath, but they keep the breathing fluid and relaxed and flowing.

And so don't hold your breathing and daily life. And how not to hold your breath in different situations is not to go around, you know, anxious, you're going to hold it and avoid it, but rather to have a gentle and inclusive attention that includes your breathing and notice what was happening to your breathing when it's held tight and maybe even stopped for the for whatever's going on. And just that awareness of it can be enough to to release it and let the breath return to a natural breathing. I think of the kind of ability to breathe in an easy, natural way. It's not easy to find and come to. It took me a long time to be able to find that kind of ease of breathing. But it's one of the great gifts and it's worth taking the time to learn that.

One of the ways to do that is to is to do it in small steps. Don't have a big ambitious effort. And one way to do it is to go look and see where in your body is it. Where does it feel like breathing is being
done in an easeful relaxed way. Often where their sensations of breathing are strongest is in the front of the torso, the diaphragm, the belly, the chest. But the side ribcage, the back rib cage, the shoulders move, all these places where there's movement connected to breathing. But it doesn't really involve the diaphragm or things associated diaphragm that are often actively involved with the process of breathing. These other places that are kind of come along, move because we're breathing. There we're not. There, it can feel the ease, relaxation, that were not to kind of just kind of following along coming along. And it might be that you tune into these more subtle places, the subtle lifting and falling of the shoulders or the subtle expansion and relaxation of the back rib cage. Something that I did for a while was as I breathe, I was paying attention to the front ribcage and I would feel ever so slightly the increased space between the ribs as I as the chest kind of expanded outwards. And that little kind of sense of open space as I breathe. That little space between the ribs was not something that controlled or something that I was working at. And so there was a feeling of ease there, relaxation of just kind of a little bit freedom there. Oh, look at that feels kind of nice. And that was kind of the small places where you might be able to feel.

Some people, it's the, the sensations of air going in and out through the nostrils. That's, you know, we're not controlling that exactly. And it's just kind of a byproduct of, the sensations are a byproduct of the breathing that we do kind of in our diaphragm, we feel that sensation to the air going back and forth. And because there's in a sense, less control or less doing in the sensations themselves, just the air that's doing it. Some people will find out more ease and freedom there. And it kind of helps step have remove us from the place of control, the places in the body. So things there can also relax a little bit.

So to begin discovering how to have an ease for breath and how do we turn to an easeful breath. And an easeful breath here is maybe a matter of degrees. It's not all or nothing. It could be that it's more useful than it was before. And just be contented and happy with that. The advantage of this easeful breath is that if we stay close to it, we learn to stay free. We learned not to get caught by things, preoccupied by things or involved mentally with things in a way that takes us away from our ease or calm or freedom. It takes us into the places where we might get caught and stuck.

And then, but we do get stuck. We do have these strong emotions, strong feelings, strong patterns of thinking, and even the breathing sometimes does get stuck because of that. Then I find it helpful to sometimes just to breathe with it, to accompany the emotions, to accompany the strong mental states that might be going on. Breathe through them. And this idea of breathing through is maybe a little bit of active imagination. And that is to kind of sometimes imagine that rather than the air going in, out through the nostrils, it's going in and out through wherever I'm paying attention. If I'm feeling tension in my shoulders, just imagine that the air is going in and out through there. There's something that little simple, innocent active imagination that keeps me in the rhythm of breathing, keeps me kind of fluid, but also attending to be in with the tensions in my shoulders or the emotions that I have. So that I'm
less likely to get tripped up by them or caught by them, or somehow get attached to them or resist them.

So sometimes, like if there's a strong emotions, like there's sadness for, for example, to breathe, find where the sadness is in the body. Find where the anger is in the body, the fear is in the body, the happiness is in the body, the joy is in the body, and breathe through it. Imagine that you're kind of in that place in the body without those emotions are most strongly living, just breathe through it. And that can create more space. They call it maybe breathing room. More space for the emotions to be there, more room for them to kind of unfold as they wish. But more importantly, it might help keep us from getting stuck in them, caught in them, reactive to them, resisting them, making a big deal of them, maybe even being bothered by them. And one of the reasons not to get that helps is not to get bothered or troubled, can be because it's so precious, so valuable, maybe even enjoyable, to be with that rhythm of breathing. As we breathe through what's difficult. And there's something about that freedom, that ease, that fluidity of breathing if we if we're able to have it that is very enjoyable. What's even more enjoyable or more valuable, not automatically but over, practice time and practicing is the attention, the awareness, then that's able to stay fluid and relaxed as the breathing is. The ability for the mind to be at ease, even with the most difficult emotional states that might be or in the most difficult mental states or even physical pain.

This idea of appropriately kind of decoupling the freedom or the peace of awareness, the calm of awareness, from the intensity of what else is going on. I learned this many many years ago when I was a new zen student and we would do, often do, we do it in lots of physical work. And some of that physical work involved physical pain. Like for example, you know, I remember lifting so had to lift this very heavy wooden object with some other person and carry it from one part of the farm to another part. Then I remember feeling how deeply the, painful the, this object was digging into my hands carrying it. It wasn't dangerous, so it's okay but it was intense. And I took and I said this is interesting. And what would it be like to be with that pain, feel that pain in my hands and my arms, and have my mind, just be aware in a free, relaxed open way and not kind of react to it, my fears, my thoughts, my stories that I make, but keep the mind kind of at ease. And I was able to learn a little bit of it, get some sense of it. Not much. But I could. That's a very interesting, it's possible to do that. And then over time I had other occasions to do this, to be with difficulties and physical pain, emotional pain, and what is it like to be respectfully present for it. And also, have the mind not be bothered by it or have awareness, be fluid and relaxed and free. So there's no holding in the awareness itself or loss of awareness, this mindful awareness.

And so again, what I found is the breathing is such a great support for this. To just come back and just kind of trust the breathing. Find out how the breathing is. Is the breathing held, is the breathing being restricted. And sometimes when it is, it's really helpful to kind of, the breathing itself can help the freedom of mindfulness. If we can then relax the breathing and open the breathing. And then it's kind of like the glue or the bond that's keeping us, the mind kind of attached to these different things. It's a
little bit harder to do. It's kind of like frozen breathing or held breathing is kind of like a glue for attachment. And as the breathing relaxes, that glue softens. And it's easier to decouple the freedom of the mind from the, you know, whatever the experiences we're having.

So, those are my thoughts for today. And I think one of the things I want to try to convey is that it's a wonderful adventure and very valuable task, project, to just gently, lovingly become more and more familiar with your breathing. And for those of you who might find the breathing difficult, certainly you don't have to focus on breathing. So other ways of practicing, that can be just as successful. But even so, it is worth to kind of in small steps, coming from behind, coming from the edges, kind of beginning exploring, getting familiar with the world of breathing, and seeing where you can find some ease with it, so that the ease can grow with the breathing and maybe release some of the challenges that have developed over our lifetime around breathing.

So breathing with. Having your breathing help accompany whatever is going on. And find that the breathing can be the boat that can carry you through the rapids of life. May you enjoy your breathing and I look forward to our time tomorrow.