

Mindfulness of Breathing (4 of 7)

Breathing As a Mirror

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I've been doing mindfulness of breathing for 45 years and I've continued to find it more and more interesting and engaging. It's engaging and interesting for a variety of reasons. Certainly, it gets more interesting as we're able to get concentrated on the breath and have greater freedom just being with the breath. Concentration itself evokes interest. It evokes new states that are not directly connected to the breathing. The breathing itself might not be so interesting sometimes, but the concentration on that uninteresting breathing opens up whole new vistas of the inner life.

But breathing can be quite interesting in its own right. I think that the breathing sometimes functions as a mirror

that helps us to see ourselves in subtle ways that, for me, are not so easily available in ordinary life. In this regard, I find it interesting that the word “psychology” (which in a simple conventional way might be understood as the study of the mind – the Greek word “psyche” means “mind” or “spirit”) also means “breathing.” It seems that the ancient Greeks saw that how the mind works is closely connected to how the breathing works. The Italian word for breathing is “spirare.” That gives us words like “respiration,” to breathe, but it also gives us the words “spirit” or “spiritual” and also “inspiration.”

I delight in the idea that the phrase “spiritual inspiration” has the word “breathing” in both words. The emphasis here is that our minds or psychology and our spirit (or what's spiritual) all come together with the breathing. There is a way that breathing is the meeting point of so many different aspects of our lives.

One of the interesting ways of studying this, if you're able, is to stay intimately, quietly, and peacefully attentive to the full cycle of breathing. This means that you don't do the checklist approach to mindfulness. For example, maybe you've been told that you should be aware of the in-breath and the out-breath and be there for it, so you are just there for the beginning of the in-breath and you check it off – you've done that. Then for the rest of the out-breath, the mind wanders off in

thought because you've done the job. At the beginning of the exhale or some point, just check that off, and exhale.

You are not really there for the whole experience. The idea is to be there for the whole experience, to have a continuity of attention, and to flow with the whole cycle of breathing. So from the beginning, middle, and end of the inhale you're experiencing how the breath changes in the beginning, middle, and end. You experience how the sensations at the beginning unfold into something else in the middle and at the end of that phase.

For beginners, it might be hard to have that nuance of attention. It's fine. That's something we learn over time. But over time as the breathing slows down and gets more settled, there is a phase where we see, breathing in, the beginning, the middle, and the end. If we are really settled in there might be a clear sense of the transition from breathing in to breathing out, and a very clear sense of the kaleidoscope of sensations that come into play as we breathe out. This is not just one or two sensations. There are many subtleties that kind of flit through the experience.

Sometimes if we are really settled, there's a gap between the end of the exhale and the inhale. That gap can be quite long when everything becomes peaceful and quiet and there's no tendency to want to breathe.

Then the breath starts up again. If we're able to follow that whole cycle, we can become aware there is a tendency at a certain point – a pattern of wandering off into thought. That moment where we wander off in thought is often a very interesting moment. It isn't just casual happenstance.

Often there are a number of conditions that come together that prompt the mind to wander off in thought. For example, at the end of the in-breath, there might be a little bit of boredom because there is so little sensation there. It's boring so we start thinking about something more interesting. Or at the end of the out-breath, some people find that there is a little bit of fear because there's a kind of giving away of control – exhaling, especially at the end, is the end of letting go fully. The idea of letting go fully is frightening for some people. This may be very very subtle. The idea is to be able to stay there and watch that and see the subtle fear come up, or the subtle movement to control, and quickly get to the in-breath so you don't have to deal with the full letting go.

Start seeing the psychology, the emotions that come into play in this very subtle way in the cycle of breathing. The more attentive and quiet we get, the more we see that subtlety. For example, I know some people who don't want to breathe out because they have a disposition to hold on to things and not give

them away. The idea of giving away the breath can represent some deeper holding on, hoarding almost, or keeping to oneself, not giving things away.

Or, as I said earlier, at the end of the out-breath, the subtle feeling of not wanting to give away control represents a bigger desire to control things in life itself. Some people, at the end of the out-breath, in that pause before they breathe in, will feel a very subtle reluctance to breathe in because it's oppressive. It's just too much – as if the world is coming in and they don't want to take more in. They don't want to do the work of breathing in. That can also represent an attitude that we carry with us in life.

Many attitudes can come along with our breathing. As we get quieter and quieter and begin to stay with the full cycle of breath and notice where we wander off or how certain emotions get activated at different points in the cycle, we are learning about ourselves in a deeper way. Breathing is like a mirror for us.

What we learn is not incidental. As we learn to breathe without interfering with the continuity of breathing, having the courage to keep breathing through all these things, in a sense by breathing through them these things begin to slowly dissolve, unravel, settle, or quiet down. We start coming into dimensions of greater freedom with the

breathing, where those attitudes don't interfere and are not activated.

Slowly, over time, just that continuity, we just stay with it all. We stay with the parts of the breath that are tight or constricted, or where different attitudes or emotions come into play. We breathe through it, letting it settle, not being reactive to it, not being troubled by it, not trying to fix it, but just gently, quietly breathing through it, with non-interference with how it is, but seeing clearly what's going on.

Then the breathing becomes more than just a mirror for what's going on in our psychology or inner life. It also comes as support for learning how to find freedom through it, freedom on the other side of it, freedom with it. You can't expect this to happen in one sitting or the next time you sit, but you might be able to experiment a little bit and be more attentive to see any hints of what I'm talking about that you can recognize in yourself as you meditate.

I'd like to suggest that at some point in the next 24 hours, maybe you can take another 30 minutes to meditate on your own and see if you can tune into the cycle of breathing in and out. See if you find any subtle attitudes or emotions of reactivity around the breathing that might be very insightful to see. They can become the vehicle, the door through which you find greater

freedom. Thank you all very much, and I'm looking forward to tomorrow.