

# Mindfulness of Breathing (3 of 10)

## Freedom with Breathing

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

An example of the importance of this is that when I used to do yoga classes, one of the common expressions of

my yoga teachers was advice not to hold my breath. I think it's fairly common for some people to hold their breath when they're trying hard to do a difficult yoga posture. The idea is not to hold your breath but to keep the breathing fluid, relaxed, and flowing.

Similarly, don't hold your breathing in daily life. The way to not hold your breath in different situations is not to go around anxious, because you will hold the breath and avoid it. Instead, you need to have a gentle and inclusive attention that includes your breathing. Notice what happens to your breathing when it's held and tight, maybe even stopped. Just that awareness of holding it can be enough to release the breath and return to natural breathing.

I think the ability to breathe in an easy natural way is 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 it. One way to learn it is to do it in small steps. Don't make a big ambitious effort. One way to do it is to look at where in your body it feels like breathing is happening in an easy, relaxed way. Often the front of the torso is where the sensations of breathing are strongest – in the diaphragm, the belly, and the chest. But the side rib cage, the back rib cage, and the shoulders also move. Look at all the places where there's movement

connected to breathing but don't actively involve the diaphragm.

At these other places that move when we're breathing, we might be able to feel more ease and relaxation. We might 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. For a while, as I breathed paying attention to the front rib cage, I could feel ever so slightly the increased space between the ribs as the chest expanded outwards. That little sense of open space between the ribs was not something I controlled or worked at, so there was a feeling of ease and relaxation there, just a little bit of freedom. "Oh, look at that, it feels kind of nice." It is in these small places that you might be able to feel relaxed breathing.

For some people, it is the sensation of air going in and out through the nostrils. We are not controlling that exactly. The sensations are a byproduct of the breathing that we do in our diaphragm. We feel the sensations of the air going back and forth. Because in a sense, there is less control or less doing in the sensations themselves – it's the air that's doing it – some people will find a little more ease and freedom there. It helps us to remove ourselves from the places in the body we control so things can relax a little bit.

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

But we do get stuck. We do have strong emotions and strong patterns of thinking. Even the breathing sometimes gets stuck because of them. Sometimes I find it helpful to just breathe with and accompany the emotions or strong mental states that might be going on. Breathe through them. The idea of breathing through is an act of imagination a little bit. Sometimes I'll imagine that rather than the air going in through the nostrils, it's going in and out through wherever I'm paying attention. If I'm feeling tension in my shoulders, I imagine that the air is going in and out through there.

There's something about this simple innocent act of imagination that keeps me in the rhythm of breathing. It helps me to stay fluid and also to attend to being with the tensions in my shoulders or the emotions I have.

That way I am less likely to get tripped up by, caught by, attached to, or resist the emotions.

Sometimes when there is a strong emotion, sadness, for example, find where the sadness is in the body. Find where the anger, the fear, the happiness, and the joy are in the body and breathe through them. Imagine that you're in that place in the body where those emotions are most strongly living. Just breathing through the emotion can create more space. They call it “breathing room.”

There is more space for the emotions to be there, more room for them to unfold as they wish. But more importantly, breathing through them might help keep us from getting stuck in them, caught in them, reactive to them, resisting them, making a big deal of them, and being bothered by them. One of the reasons doing that helps us not to get bothered or troubled can be because it's so precious, so valuable, and maybe enjoyable to be with that rhythm of breathing as we breathe through what's difficult.

There is something enjoyable about the freedom, the ease, and the fluidity of breathing, if we're able to have it. What's even more enjoyable and valuable – not automatically, but practicing over time – is when the awareness is able to stay as fluid and relaxed as the breathing. There can be an ability for the mind to be at

ease with the most difficult emotional or mental states there might be, even physical pain. The idea is we can appropriately decouple the freedom, peace, and calm of awareness from the intensity of whatever else is going on.

I learned this many, many years ago when I was a new Zen student. We would often do lots of physical work. Some of that physical work involved physical pain. For example, I remember I had to lift a very heavy wooden object with another person and carry it from one part of the farm to another part. I remember feeling how deeply and painfully the object was digging into my hands as I carried it. It wasn't dangerous, so it was okay, but it was intense. I thought, "This is interesting. What would it be like to be with that pain – to feel that pain in my hands and arms – and have my mind just be aware in a free, relaxed, open way, and not react to the pain with my fears, my thoughts, or the stories that I make, keeping the mind at ease."

I was able to learn a little bit about that and get some sense of that nonreactivity – not much. But I was able to say, "Oh, that's very interesting. It's possible to do that." Over time, I had other occasions to be with difficult physical or emotional pain and see what it is like to be respectfully present for pain with the mind not bothered by it – with a fluid, relaxed, and free awareness so

there's no holding in the awareness itself and no loss of mindful awareness.

I found that the breathing is a great support for this nonreactive awareness – just coming back and trusting the breathing. Find out how the breathing is. Is the breathing held? Is the breathing restricted? Sometimes when it

is, the breathing itself can help the freedom of mindfulness, if we can relax and open the breathing.

Then

it's like the glue or the bond that's keeping the mind attached to these different things dissolves a little and it is a little bit harder for the mind to be attached. Frozen breathing or held breathing is kind of like a glue for attachment. As the breathing relaxes, that glue softens and it's easier to decouple the freedom of the mind from whatever experiences we're having.

So those are my thoughts for today. One of the things I want to try to convey is that it's a wonderful adventure and a very valuable project to gently, lovingly become more and more familiar with your breathing. For those of you who might find the breathing difficult, you don't have to focus on breathing. Other ways of practicing can be just as successful. But even so, in small steps, coming from behind, coming from the edges, it is worth it to

begin to explore and get familiar with the world of breathing. See where you can find some ease with breathing so that ease can grow and maybe release some of the challenges around breathing that have developed over a lifetime.

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