

Mindfulness of Breathing (1) Introduction

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Good day. It's nice to be here with all of you. I would like the theme of this week and the coming weeks to be mindfulness of breathing. There are a number of reasons for this. One is that since it's the beginning of the year, I thought it would be good to go back to basics. Many of us have been here at the 7am sitting for many months. While we've done a wide range of teachings, it's also good to come back to the basics.

In a sense, I think it's always good to start over again, almost as if we're beginners almost. One of the basic practices I like to teach is mindfulness of breathing. This may be pretty obvious since breathing has been a big part of most of the guided meditations that I've been doing.

The Buddha's teachings on breathing and the full potential of mindfulness of breathing is not just a basic or beginner's practice. It's really a practice that can take us

all the way to awakening. Much of the full depth and range of what Buddhism offers is available through mindfulness of breathing. The path of practice can be negotiated through mindfulness of breathing.

One of my favorite teachings of the Buddha is his specific, detailed instructions for mindfulness of breathing. He gives 16 steps or stages as a map for deepening or filling out the experience of mindfulness of breathing, all the way to awakening. In these 16 steps, there is an opportunity to look at a whole series of different aspects of spiritual life, meditation life, and our own life, that goes deeper and deeper. So it's no longer the basic, beginning practice that breathing can be. The breathing opens up to these other dimensions that are quite wonderful.

Over this next period, I'd like to go through the 16 stages of mindfulness of breathing. Some people know it by its Pali name. It's usually called *ānāpānasati* in which *sati* means 'mindfulness,' and *ānāpāna* means "breathing in and breathing out – inhaling and exhaling." It begins very simply, and as concentration and intimacy develops, the whole teaching and practice becomes more developed.

I don't know how long it will take – maybe the whole month of January. I think I will leave it open-ended for a while as we go through the steps. I trust this will create

a very strong foundation for the rest of the year. Also I'm pretty confident that the foundation you have built over these last nine months of the 7am sitting will serve you really well for going through *ānāpānasati*.

For some people, mindfulness of breathing doesn't work so well. There are many reasons for this and for breathing to not be the central focus of meditation. It's completely fine to have other focuses or to practice in other ways. However, since mindfulness of breathing is what I've been doing so much over the last months, I'm trusting that those of you who are sticking with it have some beneficial relationship to mindfulness of breathing – and so it will work for you. But if you don't, you're welcome to ignore the references to breathing and translate it to how you're practicing. Some of the dynamics of how things unfold and evolve in the 16 steps of *ānāpānasati* also unfold with other meditation subjects or ways of doing mindfulness practice. Hopefully, you'll be able to recognize yourself in some of the steps as we go along – and see how they come into play for you.

I've been practicing mindfulness of breathing for probably 45 years, and I do not tire of it. I find it actually becomes richer and more interesting as time goes along. It's one of my favorite things to do. I feel very grateful. I feel like I've been transformed in wonderfully beneficial ways by this mindfulness of breathing practice.

It's a mindfulness practice of breathing that's not pure mindfulness. One of the reasons I like to emphasize mindfulness of breathing is because staying with breathing has a dual function. It's a wonderful place to cultivate mindfulness and concentration. To be able to cultivate those together is one of the benefits of mindfulness of breathing compared to other objects of mindfulness.

The 16 steps of mindfulness of breathing are clearly a way of developing concentration together with a constant mindful awareness of breathing itself. That's one of the reasons I like doing it. I also like the intimacy with breathing and with oneself.

Breathing is not just a mechanical activity. It's not just an exchange of oxygen with carbon dioxide in our body, where how much we need to breathe depends upon the activities that we're involved in. For example, running requires us to breathe differently than if we are sitting quietly. Breathing also shifts and changes based on our relationship to ourselves, what's happening in the world, and the emotions that come up. Even our thoughts and how we relate to our thinking can very subtly affect how we're breathing.

It's like our whole life has threads that are intimately connected to how we breathe. Breathing sits at the crossroads of so much of our life. Sometimes if you sit

at a crossroads, everything comes to it sooner or later. Or to change the analogy, it's said that if you're a nature photographer in the plains of Africa, and you want to take pictures of a lot of animals, one really good way to do that is to sit at a watering hole and wait. Sooner or later, all the animals have to come to the watering hole. It's a lot easier than searching the plains for them.

It's the same way with mindfulness of breathing. Just about everything is related to breathing one way or the other. So we sit with the breathing, trusting that what needs to be attended to will show itself in the breathing and how we breathe. It's all connected.

We see a deep connection to breathing in our lives in some of the wonderful Greek and Latin words related to breathing. In Greek, *psycho* is related to the word 'breath' or 'breathing.' Psychology is literally the study of breathing. *Psycho* is also related to 'mind' and 'spirit.' The whole way that breathing and the mind, spirit, or inner life are connected is expressed in the Greek word *psycho*.

We see the same thing with *spiritus*, the Latin word for 'breath.' The words 'respire' and 'respiration' have the word *spiritus* in them. To respire is to breathe again. The word 'spiritual' contains the word for 'breathing.' 'Spirit' is also related to the Latin word for 'breathing.' I'm very fond of the idea that the two words

‘spiritual’ and ‘inspiration’ have the Latin word for ‘breathing’ connected to them.

The words ‘conspiracy’ and ‘conspirators’ also contain the word ‘breathing.’ We are a group of morning meditation conspirators, breathing together for these days.

You find in other languages as well that the word for breathing is closely connected to words for our inner psychic energy or life force – the *qi* or *prana* within us. It seems to be a very common idea in human cultures that breathing is closely connected to something deep, inner, and spiritual – the soul, mind, heart, something quite intimate.

I find it quite marvelous that breathing can feel connected to what’s most intimate within us. It’s also the interface between what is most intimate and what is most not-self, not ourselves. Some people might say what’s greater than self, but I think Buddhists would say maybe what is most not-self. That breathing is our own and something not our own. This wonderful interplay between intimacy and something that’s greater or freer than self is right there together with the breathing. This points to the potential of breathing.

Now, it’s not automatic that people should feel this intimacy or this wonderful potential that mindfulness of breathing has. Even for me, after all these years of

practice, there are times when I sit down to meditate, and the breathing is far from a pleasant, intimate experience. I have something that I call “cardboard breath,” where it feels like cardboard. It feels kind of dead, tasteless, and uninspired.

I've learned that's how it is sometimes, and I just go along with it. Sooner or later, it will change and be something else. I trust that it's okay to be mindful, regardless of how the breath is. I don't have to have the breath be sweet, wonderful, or intimate. I trust that it's good to just be with the breath as it is.

Especially for people who are new, they can't imagine how breathing is so wonderful and profound. It seems boring, plain, and far away from things that really give excitement and energy to life – or far away from things that keep us safe.

Mindfulness of breathing is something that takes a while to learn and to settle into. As we find the potential in really settling in and being relaxed, an inner world opens up. It's an inner world that I like to think is represented by the English expression “breathing room.” We sit in order to find lots of breathing room – to have breathing room for our full life, mind, thoughts, and heart. Rather than being claustrophobic, breathing helps give all this room. There's something about settling in and focusing

on breathing that makes more room – makes more intimacy and clarity in this life as we go along.

That's a general introduction to the plan for the next period of time. I'll say some more introductory words tomorrow about mindfulness of breathing, specifically referring to the discourse that the Buddha taught on mindfulness of breathing. Then we'll start the 16 steps.

Thank you so much for being a part of this, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.