

Mindfulness of Breathing (2 of 7)

Continuity

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Today is the second talk on mindfulness of breathing. One of the goals of mindfulness meditation (and many kinds of meditation) involves, in one way or another, being centered in the present moment and here in a continuous way, so awareness is really present for experience. In contrast to that are all the ways that we're not really present or here in a qualitatively heightened way – where we don't really feel and experience life or notice what's happening in a deep way.

Probably one of the most common ways that we avoid being here is to wander off in discursive thoughts and

commentary, telling ourselves stories about the past or predictions about the future. When the mind wanders off there, it can feel sometimes very pleasant and enjoyable. It might feel like a drag, a challenge, or unpleasant to interrupt that.

But the wandering mind is a little bit like water. When water is flowing down in a mighty river, it can be quite beautiful to see the power and strength of the river, knowing that it's going where it's supposed to go. If someone comes along and dams that river, then the river stops. It's no longer a river. But then as the water builds up behind the dam, it starts spilling out across the countryside and spreads out across the plains and through the towns and cities. The water has a certain kind of freedom in going over the banks of the river and flowing out across the plains. But in doing that, it's creating a lot of destruction. It's no longer a river.

There is a feeling of freedom in the mind's ability to wander freely off into thought. But in doing this, we've left the primary river of life, the river of being in the present moment, which has a flow, a vitality, and preciousness. These can be lost if we allow the dam to interrupt and let everything overflow the sides and cause all kinds of problems. We can be caught in the floods. However, if we identify the flooding with freedom, not allowing the floods to go over the banks into the countryside can feel like a loss of freedom. But

that's what the river wants to do when it is blocked behind the dam.

Continuity of attention in the present moment is kind of like opening up the dam so that our life can flow freely in the present moment and we can be aware of experience as it comes and goes. We all have the capacity to stay in the present moment. Where this capacity to be here is most activated, where it's most utilized or occurs most often for people, is sometimes when they're afraid. Fear really heightens present-moment awareness. A mountain climber who's climbing a cliff might have enough concern to stay present for it.

Recently I read a first-person account of a brain surgeon who spent hours doing refined microscopic surgery. He said how crucial it is not to have the mind waver. I can imagine there's a certain amount of fear there that would keep your attention and your interest because it's so important. Or imagine, while playing a championship game of tennis, wandering off and thinking about your resentments about your high school partner. The ball would just go right by you. But, you know, the interest in the game and the enjoyment of it can keep you right there in the present moment. When you are reading a good book or watching an interesting movie, the mind doesn't waver. It stays in the present

moment because the book or movie is interesting and entertaining.

When we start doing meditation practice, both the gift and the challenge of it is partly that sooner or later it turns out it doesn't engage our fear, it doesn't engage our desire for entertainment, and it's sometimes not naturally interesting. So because of all that, what meditation requires is for us to develop and strengthen our natural capacity to provide that continuous awareness ourselves, rather than relying on something external as the impetus for it.

This continuity of attention to breathing comes from a variety of different functions of the mind. One of them is relaxing. It's very hard to be in the present moment if we're not relaxed. Certainly, there can be a tense continuous attention to the present moment, but it is exhausting and counterproductive. We're looking for a soft, relaxed continuity of present-moment attention that doesn't waver from the present moment and doesn't wander off a lot. That can come from relaxation.

Relaxation works because the very tensions we have in our minds, our hearts, and our bodies are often the fuel for the wandering mind. So as relaxation kicks in, there is less and less impetus to wander off in thought. The continuity of present-moment attention also comes from

a real dedication to doing it. We engage an intentional faculty – a sense of purpose – this is what I'm doing. This can be overdone, but without some sense of purpose, the mind will drift off too easily. It has no anchor, it has no ballast to keep us present.

Another mental function is the development of strength in mindfulness. Mindfulness is like a muscle. The more we practice it, the stronger it gets. Then it's easier to stay present. There can be a heightened alertness where we notice when the mind begins wandering off. People might feel that this heightened awareness is work. It can initially be a little stressful to put our energy into being a little more alert to notice when the mind wanders off. But we can develop a habit of turning on the light in the mind and keeping it on to notice if the mind wanders off.

In the long term, doing this lets the mind be much more at peace than if we freely allow the mind to wander off, flooding the plains all around us.

One way to develop this continuity of attention in the present moment is to stay with the breathing. As we do it, we want to be alert and attentive enough to know what it feels like to really be with the breathing so we know what it's like when we've lost touch. That takes familiarity. It takes really registering what the experience of staying present with the breathing is like. We also

want a heightened awareness to notice what it's like when the mind begins to wander off – how there's a loss of intimacy with ourselves, a certain kind of intimacy with the breathing and with our direct experience.

When we can notice the mind wandering off, we don't jerk the mind back, or get upset with ourselves for wandering off, but lovingly recognize, "That's not what I'm doing now. I don't need to pick that up. That can be for later. Right now we're staying here with the breathing." Don't wander off. Don't follow the floods. Come back here. Stay inside. Stay with yourself with the breathing.

As we develop more and more continuity with the breathing, continuity with the breathing isn't the main point. Rather, the main point is developing the mind's capacity to have continuous awareness of what's happening, to really be here and present, here for the experience of now. That opens up the floodgates for something deeper to flow, some deeper sense of aliveness and connection, a deeper sense of flow. We connect to the changing nature of this life. We can live in that river and find the freedom that's possible there. That can be found. It's not really freedom to allow the waters to break over the banks of the river and flood the lands.

So we practice continuity. In the springtime, I talked about one of the images I connect with the breathing, which is that of petting a cat. We don't pet the cat 100% continuously, but it is intermittently continuous. After we stroke the cat, we lift our hand, bring it back to the front of the cat, and stroke the cat again. It is the same way with the breathing. Don't expect it to be absolutely continuous. But we come back and stroke the breath (or are stroked by our breathing, by the inhales and exhales.)

We allow ourselves to feel and experience that in an intimate, close way until something inside begins to purr. So whenever we need to remember to come back, we just contentedly come back to the breathing. If the mind wanders off, we contentedly come back and stroke the cat, stroke the breath, or are stroked by the breathing. If the mind is strongly pulling itself into discursive thought, one of the great ancient techniques is to spend a little time counting your breath. You might want to keep it simple and count one to three. You can count from one to three on the exhales, then start over again.

Sometimes people will do one for the inhale and say one again for the exhale, two for the next inhale, two for the exhale, three for the inhale, and three for the exhale. The point is to give the thinking mind something to do rather than wandering off in thought. A more

strictly *vipassanā* technique that's closer to mindfulness than counting is to simply name or label with a note “in” as you're breathing in, and “out” as you're breathing out. Or “rising” as the belly or chest rises, and “falling” as it falls. That little note or counting keeps you on track so you stay here. You might notice that when you stop counting or saying the note, you begin to wander off. Continuity is part of the nuts and bolts of meditation that we want to develop and strengthen over time. It is done by practicing it and practicing it and practicing it. We develop our capacities with a lot of generosity to ourselves, a lot of forgiveness, a lot of non-striving, and just starting over and over again. We have tremendous capacities for practice that will naturally grow if we just keep doing it. Let mindfulness of breathing support the development of continuous attention so you can be really here in your experience.

Thank you.