

Breathing (1 of 5) Introduction to Mindfulness Instruction Series

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

awareness, breath, meditation, baggage, shed, prescriptive, descriptive, allow, relax

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Hello everyone. For the next four or five weeks, I would like to go progressively through the basic instructions that we give for mindfulness meditation here at IMC. Usually, we do a five-week introduction to meditation course, which meets one evening a week. Some of you have probably done it with us, and the course is available on AudioDharma.

The first week, we give an introduction to mindfulness of breathing. The second week, we talk about mindfulness of the body. As people settle into meditation, the body often becomes very loud or clear, because sitting often gets uncomfortable if you're not used to meditating. The third week, we talk about mindfulness of emotions; the fourth week, mindfulness of thinking. The fifth week, a range of topics are talked about.

This sequence is meant to slowly and steadily lay the groundwork for a time when all of those areas of practice are integrated into a whole. Then we practice mindfulness depending on what is compelling, what is predominant, or what is happening the most. We might be aware of breathing, the body, emotions, thoughts, or other experiences of our life.

The goal of mindfulness practice is the ability to develop an awareness that's available to the full range of human experience. That is valuable for many reasons. One reason it's valuable is that we have heightened attention to many areas of our life. Things don't remain unconscious, unknown, or sidelined. Sooner or later, everything comes through the knowing of awareness and seeing clearly.

As we do this practice over time, we also start appreciating more and more what it is to be aware – what it is to be mindful. In particular, we notice all the extra baggage we bring along and put on top of the simplicity of awareness. This could be the expectations we have – the idea that we have to do a lot of things, the idea of being an agent: “I have to prove myself,” “I shouldn't fail,” “It's all up to me to do it.” We might bring along fears of what's coming. We might bring along big goals, such as ambition around meditation. There might be more of these kinds of things we bring along with awareness.

As we become more and more aware of all the extra stuff we bring along, we can start shedding it and discover the simplicity of awareness itself. Eventually, part of that simplicity is that awareness exists and can be present without us doing it. Awareness becomes autonomous from our doing. Our role is to allow for it and stay close to it. It is a magical, special time when we feel that awareness is just the nature of who we are, and we don't have to insert the self, agency, and doing into it. There is a shift in mindfulness.

For someone who's a raw beginner, the practice does involve doing. We are engaging in something that changes the direction and course of our life: from just letting ourselves wander off in thoughts, desires, and aversions, and being caught up in things, to waking up and not being lost in the world – being really present and centered here, in the middle of our experience. There is doing in coming back and applying ourselves to the breathing, applying ourselves to the body, and to the different areas that we pay attention to. There is a sense of applying ourselves and doing it. That is partly because it's an alternative to being lost.

As mindfulness builds over time, the sense of autonomous, independent awareness becomes stronger and stronger. Then it is more as if awareness receives experience. Things arrive in awareness.

Awareness is not something we have to do. It is something we allow. There can be a sense that things just arrive or arise within awareness.

Awareness becomes freer and freer of the sense of me being the doer and the agent. In a sense, awareness becomes independent of the usual ways that we identify who we are – me, myself, and mine. So the mindfulness instructions that we give have two sides to it. One side is something we do, so the instructions are prescriptive – this is what we do. That is often the case, certainly for beginners. But at different phases of what's happening in our life, the different ways of practicing are always coming and going depending on what is needed at the time. If a very experienced practitioner is really frazzled and agitated, they might be better off applying themselves in meditation prescriptively.

The second way that mindfulness instructions work is that they are not instructions about what to do, but instructions about what to notice. They are descriptive of what arrives in awareness when awareness is established. When awareness is established, it allows the experience of breathing, the experience of the body, the experience of emotions, and the experience of thoughts to arrive.

There is a radical shift from being a doer to being an allower. That allowing allows for a different way of

participating in the world, one that is still very effective, but is very different from having it be all up to me, myself, and mine to do and be.

This week, I'm going to talk about breathing. On each of the five days of the week, I will repeat the same theme so that the different facets of the practice become a little bit more familiar and available to you. On Mondays, the theme will be relaxation. Tuesdays, the theme will be recognition. Wednesdays – respect. Thursdays – restoring, and on Fridays, it will be release. Hopefully, we'll look at each of these different aspects of the practice in relation to the breath, body, emotions, and thoughts.

For today, the topic is relaxation with breathing. We did a little of that in the guided meditation. One function of coming back to the breath over and over and over again – when the mind wanders off and we come back – is that when we return to the breathing, the breathing becomes the anchor for establishing awareness.

It is not that we force ourselves back to the breath – it is more like we welcome ourselves back to the breath over and over and over again. The regularity of breathing takes energy away from the ways that we are tense around our thoughts, tense around our emotions, and caught up in things. The more preoccupied we are with

thinking, the more tension, force, and pressure there is in the system.

Gentle returning to be aware of the breathing begins to take away some of the energy that keeps the mind, the heart, and the body tense with our concerns. In addition, the regularity and the rhythm of breathing help many of us to relax. You can even help that by allowing yourself to relax on the exhale – relax gently, openly.

For some people, the focus on breathing is difficult. Sometimes this is normal, and the process is to work through this gently and patiently, not making a problem out of how difficult it might be, with the tension, the holding patterns of the breathing, or controlling the breath. It is well worth spending time to see if you can work through it.

For some people, the breath may not be an appropriate object for attention. For example, I have known people who had a near-death experience of drowning or some other difficulty in which breathing was a challenge. The memory and impact of that experience were such that the breath never really became a good object for meditation. For them, just being rooted and grounded here in the body in some open way is much better. There are other options as well. But it's really nice to work through some of the difficulty around breathing, if

possible. Learning to relax with the breath is a big part of that.

So that's the plan for this next period of time. I'm hoping that the instructions and teachings I give will work for people who are beginners and those who are quite experienced in practice as well. Sometimes, as people become more mature in this practice, the difference between a beginner and a mature person is that a mature person is a better beginner – a more thorough beginner.

Finally, the Sunday morning talk at IMC was an introduction to this series that we're doing. If some of you didn't hear that talk, you might listen to the recording on AudioDharma. It sets the stage a little for what we're doing.

Thank you. I'm looking forward to sharing something I love quite a bit.