

# Breathing (4 of 5) Restoring Wholeness

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## **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

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This week, the theme is mindfulness of breathing. It's a remarkable experience to be at the birth of an animal or a human being and to witness the first breath. The first time I saw that was the birth of a calf. I don't know what was going on with the calf, but it certainly didn't look alive when it was born and came out. At some point, it took a breath, and the eyes opened. There was life.

Sometimes life is marked by the first breath and, at the other end, marked by the last breath, the last exhale. And in between, we have a lifetime of breathing. But each inbreath is a kind of beginning. Each outbreath is where something comes to an end. And in that rhythm, there's a renewal; there's a rebirth that goes on. One aspect of mindfulness of breathing is how this rebirth or restoration goes on, which is the theme for today.

As people settle into just being with the breath and are no longer scattered, caught up in, or disconnected from whatever drama is going on in life, their whole psychophysical system begins to get organized and healed. The jigsaw puzzle pieces come together and get settled.

There's a restoration of health – a spiritual or a kind of psychological health. To call it psychological may imply that it is just the mind, but it's very embodied. A sense of embodied health can happen even when parts of the body are sick. It's a different kind of health than what we usually think of as physical health.

This psychological or spiritual health can feel like: “*This* is what's healthy. This is what's normal.” For some people – and I've had this experience – when we settle into meditation, it can feel like the most healthy and appropriate way of being. Whereas ordinary daily life – that's what feels extraordinary. That's what feels like an altered state. A healthy state feels like, “Oh, this is really what life can be about.” It's like waking up from a nap and feeling, “Ah...I'm restored.”

So, in the same way, as we allow ourselves to settle into meditation, the ordinary concerns of life fall away and we're just here focused simply on the breath; but not focused in a way that's tight, constricted, or greedy for something. It's more this sense of allowing, respecting,

and making room for our experience. It's almost like getting out of the way, but not getting out of the way so that we are no longer connected and attentive. We are attentive to the breathing – to our experience – allowing it to wash over us.

Allow the breathing to kind of occur so the breathing can restore itself. The breathing can find its way to some kind of health and healing. Because breathing is so interconnected with our emotions, body, thoughts, psychology, and intentions, the whole phenomenon of breathing feels like it moves to health. It moves to wholeness, to harmony. It's wonderful to feel: "Now this is normal. This is what ordinary is like." The stress – the stressful mind that people ordinarily live with – is not ordinary. That's extraordinary; that's losing touch with what's normal and healthy.

There's a restoration that goes on. The restoration is not only about letting go, but also allowing something to grow, spread, develop, and be here for us. This restoration is independent of Buddhist ideas of deep letting go, not-self, and emptiness. If those are overemphasized, then sometimes it feels like we're subtly, or maybe not so subtly, diminishing the definitiveness, clarity, and value of being a human being.

The restoration process of meditation is important. We're allowing ourselves to become whole and harmonious. We're allowing things to settle and drop away so that a kind of inner confidence, strength, and definitiveness can emerge. This feels like everything is harmonious and peaceful.

If there is conceit – if there is a diminishment of ourselves or a denial of part of ourselves – that can feel stressful or not quite right because it's a loss of harmony. It's fragmenting. We can't get too caught up in "can't have conceit," but we also can't have a devaluing. There's a kind of embodied restoration of wholeness that can happen.

Maybe the language I'm using is too strong. Maybe it implies having a strong way of being, but it is also gentle. It kind of sneaks up on us. It's not something we can force, insist on, or spend a lot of time looking for. But as we stay with the breath and let go of our thoughts, let go of the ways we diminish or fragment ourselves, and just settle in, *allow* the breath to breathe itself. Allow the breath to breathe through the body. Allow the body to breathe. Allow everything to come into awareness. We might find there's a shift, a settling, and a movement towards healing, wholeness, and fullness that happens.

Getting a sense of that can bring a lot of confidence to the value of not prioritizing our neuroses; not prioritizing our suffering; not prioritizing our challenges and difficulties. To say “not prioritizing” does not mean denying that those things exist, or pushing them away, or considering them unworthy of our attention. They are worthy of the whole. They are worthy of being recognized.

There can be a strong tendency to over-prioritize our neuroses, fears, suffering, and challenges – to limit and narrow our life to them. This process of settling into breathing – being with the breath – begins shifting those priorities so that something can restore, reemerge, and become whole.

I hope that made sense. So, the topic on Monday was relax, Tuesday was recognition, yesterday was respect, and today is restore. Tomorrow will be release, which is often more closely identified as part of Buddhist practice. But all of the first four processes set the stage for a healthy release, and that’s the topic for tomorrow.

Thank you all very much, and I look forward to meeting tomorrow.