

# Mindfulness of Breathing (7 of 7)

## Exuberant Joy

August 30, 2020

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS** *piti*, mirror, benefit, concentration, memorization, learning, stress-reducing, rapture, exquisiteness, unified, harmonized, serotonin, self-fulfilling *samādhi*, self-enjoying *samādhi*, absorption, preoccupied available, open, attitudes, beliefs, reactivity, unpreoccupied, gymnast, walking, stroking, cat, liberation, hindrances, wellbeing, peace, tranquility, equanimity, attachments, serve

**Gil Fronsdal**

Many benefits come over the years of doing mindfulness practice. And many benefits come from mindfulness of breathing. The Buddha said mindfulness of breathing brings “great fruit and great benefit.” Over the years of doing mindfulness of breathing, it's quite rewarding and satisfying to begin discovering all the ways in which it supports our lives – all the ways in which it becomes a mirror for us and helps us to see ourselves more deeply.

We begin to see it helps us to become more focused and concentrated in whatever we're doing. Developing focus and concentration on breathing (or any kind of meditative concentration and focus) makes us available for daily life so we can stay focused on the tasks that we're doing. We can engage in a more focused, effective way. Concentration is also very helpful for memorization, learning and remembering things when the mind becomes less filled with clutter, thoughts, and distractions and becomes settled and can focus on what's going on. Breathing and mindfulness as a whole can be stress-reducing.

But as the practice goes deeper, or fuller (depending on the metaphor you like), a time comes when an exquisite exuberance starts to arise. Maybe exuberance is too strong a word. The English word that is occasionally used is “rapture.” I seldom use that word. Today I'm using the word “exuberance.” Some people use the word “thrill” to capture some of the qualities of this.

The Pali word is “*pīti*.” I prefer to translate it as “joy.” This is a kind of meditative joy that arises when we concentrate on anything at all. Joy is a little bit confusing for some people because many people associate joy with some *thing* that's inherently delightful and enjoyable, so how can breathing be so enjoyable? You know it's not just a thing that brings in air and so forth.

What's exquisite about breathing is the exquisiteness of a mind that becomes organized, unified, and harmonized by staying with only the breathing, just riding the breath. It's quite likely that that kind of organized, harmonized, and unified mind that really stays with breathing is a means by which chemicals in the brain like serotonin get released that produce a kind of joy and happiness. But saying this sounds kind of reductionistic and maybe mechanistic.

When we get concentrated on the breath, it feels as if life has become full and complete, and we feel as if we are entering into a whole different world. It is very rewarding and satisfying. In Zen sometimes they call it “self-fulfilling *samādhi*” or “self-enjoying *samādhi*” – the *samādhi* or absorption that enjoys itself.

It takes a while to get there. One thing that's really helpful to understand is that as the mindfulness gets stronger and we start seeing more clearly our thinking, our attitudes, our beliefs, and our reactivity, we also start seeing what we hold on to, what we clutter our mind with, and what we are attached to even against our wishes. We begin to see how the mind latches on and holds onto things that are not really for our good.

We can learn how to put those aside, not hold on to them, and not be preoccupied by them. We can have a mind that feels unpreoccupied, that is open and available in a unified full way, so we can give our full attention to something very simple. In walking meditation we can give full attention to the feet as they walk, with a relaxed open, soft mind where there's lots of space to feel the exquisiteness of the foot coming down on the floor, bending, and starting to lift up again.

People who don't meditate might think we're crazy when we talk about this kind of joy. I like the word “exquisiteness” because it's not any different than the exquisiteness of something that people *would* recognize as quite wonderful to watch and do, such as the exquisiteness of watching a great gymnast. It is such a pleasure to watch them.

We can feel that kind of pleasure with just the steps as we walk. This is not because the steps are as skilled as a gymnast, but because there's something about really being there for walking – being pulled into its world, and sensing and feeling without the burden or the clutter of the negative thoughts, criticisms, doubts, desires, and impatience.

It is not easy to quickly start feeling this meditative joy, but it is part of the territory of meditation. Joy is part of the range of possibilities there. It felt important for me to

offer it to you as a part of the overview of what mindfulness of breathing can be about. I offer it with the hope that if you know about this, when you're on the edge of the possibility of opening to this kind of meditative joy, you'll recognize it. "Oh yes this is good. Maybe this is the time to turn up the corners of my lips a little bit." This is a time to really slide on the experience of breathing or stroke the breath like you're stroking a cat – to be stroked by reality or by the universe like you're the cat. It is a time to enter into and get absorbed in the experience of breathing.

This is not a hedonistic tradition where the point is just to have lots of pleasure and lots of joy. In the teachings of the Buddha this kind of meditative meditative joy arises when we're starting to let go of the forces of suffering in us – the forces of distraction and preoccupation and the hindrances. Joy is kind of like a way station on the way to liberation. As we start getting liberated in small ways, such as liberated from the hindrances temporarily because we're focused and in the present moment, feelings of satisfaction, joy, delight, happiness, or well-being begin to surface. This becomes a foundation that supports us to become even more concentrated because we feel interested. Joy is pleasant, and it feels satisfying – "Yes this is good." The movement of "yes" that can be part of meditation is easier to step into. We say, "Yes here I'll stay with this. The mind wants to be with joy. This feels good."

In the greater involvement and unification around practice, the mind has a chance to get quieter and quieter, stiller and stiller. Some of the joy and exuberance and even some of the happiness and well-being fade away. This is not a loss because what follows is even more exquisite. This is often a wonderful feeling of peace, tranquility, and equanimity.

Again, the endpoint is not to have peace, equanimity, and tranquility, as if we're supposed to be a tranquil person going around the world. The peace happens to be a wonderful stage of practice that supports deep letting go of some of the deepest attachments we have. This liberation is the endpoint of mindfulness of breathing.

I like to think liberation is not the end point either. The natural consequence of liberation is to be available to serve the world, not because it's a duty or we should – of course you would. When you have no attachments of your own any more, you're available to respond to the cries of the world and care for the world.

When I was in Japan practicing one of my Zen teachers said that everything you need to know about Buddhism can be discovered through meditation on breathing. As I said earlier, meditation on breathing is not for everyone. But it is a pretty wonderful thing. Even if it's not for you it

still can have benefits for you and you might just dip into it from time to time and see what you can learn about yourself through occasional attention to breathing. Maybe standing in line in a store is an interesting time to study it.

I hope this focus on mindfulness of breathing has been useful and engaging, and something that you can bring to your everyday life. For today's topic – enjoyment – maybe you can avail yourself of or attune yourself to more of the small pleasures and joys of life. Let enjoyment massage you and work you and support you as you go through your day as you continue on this wonderful path of mindfulness practice. May this day be a wonderful day of practice. Thank you.