

Mindfulness of Breathing



METHODS FOR REFINING THE attention were already developed to a very sophisticated degree in India 2,500 years ago, during the time of Gautama the Buddha. These advanced states of *samadhi*, or meditative concentration, were found to yield profound states of serenity and bliss, and many contemplatives cultivated these states as ends in themselves. Gautama's great innovation was to further develop these methods of *samadhi*, then apply this refined, focused attention to the direct, experiential investigation of the mind and its relation to the rest of the world. In this way, the cultivation of *shamatha*, or meditative quiescence, is analogous to the development of the telescope for the sustained, precise observation of celestial phenomena. The only instrument we have for directly observing mental phenomena is mental awareness, and this is honed into a fine tool by the development of *shamatha*.

The Buddha taught dozens of techniques to refine, stabilize, and clarify the attention. One in particular is especially appropriate for highly discursive, conceptual, imaginative, mentally talkative people: mindfulness of breathing. From the earliest records we have of the Buddha's own pursuit of liberation, on the night of his enlightenment, he first stabilized his mind with the practice of *shamatha*, then applied it to *vipashyana*, the cultivation of contemplative insight into the nature of reality.

Mindfulness of breathing was the first Buddhist meditation I began practicing, and I often recommend it to my students as the first step on the meditative path. I began learning it from books in

1970, especially the writings of the Thai monk Buddhadasa. I was leading the life of a reclusive college student at the time, spending a lot of time reading about the contemplative traditions of the world, and beginning to study the Tibetan language. A few years later, when I was living as a monk in the mountains above Dharamsala, India, I received personal instruction in the technique from two Theravada Buddhist meditation teachers who had trained in Burma and Thailand, Goenka and Kitti Subho. In 1980, I traveled to Sri Lanka, solely to meditate, and I then had the opportunity to train for months in this practice under the renowned scholar and contemplative Balangoda Anandamaitreya. Over the years, I have also been taught variations of this practice by a number of Tibetan lamas, but I have relied primarily on my Theravada teachers for this kind of meditation.

Practice

In our practices for refining and balancing the attention, we will begin with the Buddhist strategy of moving from the coarse to the subtle, from the easy to the more difficult. This approach begins with mindfulness of breathing, proceeds to settling the mind in its natural state, and concludes with the practice of simply being aware of being aware. In each of these practices, we start the session by establishing a suitable bodily posture, and cultivating three qualities as we “settle the body in its natural state”: relaxation, stillness, and vigilance.

Relaxation

There are two postures I would recommend for this practice: sitting or lying down. Generally, the optimal and most widely recommended posture is sitting cross-legged on a cushion. If this is too uncomfortable, you may sit in a chair, with both feet resting on the ground. But another, less commonly used posture is lying down on the back, with your arms outstretched to your sides, palms up, and your head resting on a pillow. This is especially useful if you have a back problem or if you are physically tired or ill.

Whatever posture you adopt, let your body rest at ease, with your spine straight but not rigid. Relax your shoulders, with your arms loosely dropping to your sides. Allow gravity to take over. Now bring your awareness to your face. It's best if your eyes are hooded, not completely shut. Soften the muscles of your face, specifically the jaw, temples, and forehead. Soften your eyes. Let your face be as relaxed as that of a sleeping baby. Then complete this initial relaxation process by taking three slow, deep, gentle breaths through the nostrils. As you inhale, breathe smoothly and deeply down to the bottom of your abdomen. Like filling a pot with water, feel your abdomen slowly fill and expand, then breathe into your diaphragm, and finally into the upper chest. Then release the breath fully, without forcing it out. Do this three times, keeping your awareness present in the body, especially noting the sensations of the in- and out-breaths. Following these deep breaths, return to normal, unregulated respiration. Let this quality of bodily relaxation be an outer expression of your mind: let your awareness be at ease, releasing all your cares; simply be present in the here and now.

As you breathe in and out, direct your attention to the tactile sensations of the passage of the breath at the apertures of your nostrils or above your upper lip. Take a moment to locate the sensation. Rest your attention right where you feel the incoming and outgoing breaths. Once in a while, check to see that you are still breathing down into the abdomen. This will happen naturally if your body is settled, with your back straight and your belly relaxed and soft.

Stillness

Throughout each meditation session, let your body be as still as possible, with a minimum of fidgeting; remain motionless as a mountain. This helps to bring about the same quality in the mind: one of stillness, where your attention is focused and continuous.

Vigilance

Even if you are lying down, let your posture reflect a sense of vigilance, not just collapsing into drowsiness. If you are sitting up,

either on a cushion or in a chair, slightly raise your sternum, while keeping the belly soft and relaxed. In this way, you will naturally breathe into your abdomen first, and when the respiration deepens you may feel your diaphragm and chest expanding as well. Sit at attention, without slouching forward or tilting to either side. This physical posture also reinforces this same quality of vigilance mentally.

Mindfulness of Breathing

Maintaining focused attention is vital for virtually everything we do throughout the day, including working, driving, relating to others, enjoying times of recreation and entertainment, and engaging in spiritual practice. Therefore, the theme for this session is learning to focus the attention. Whatever your normal level of attention—whether you are usually scattered or composed—the quality of your attention can be improved, and this brings with it extraordinary benefits. In this practice, we shift from a compulsively conceptual, fragmented mode of awareness to one of deeper simplicity, moving into a witnessing or observing mode. In addition to honing the attention, this meditation will enhance your health, tune your nervous system, allow you to sleep better, and improve your emotional balance. This is a different way of applying our minds, and it improves with practice. The specific method we will follow is the cultivation of mindfulness of breathing.

Due to habit, thoughts are bound to intrude. When they come, just release them as you exhale, without identifying with them, without emotionally responding to them. Watch the thought emerge, pass before you, and then fade away. Then rest your attention in the sense of repose, not dull and sluggish, but at ease. For the time being, if all you can accomplish in one *ghatika*, or twenty-four minutes, is to bring forth a sense of mental relaxation, that's great. Maintain your attention right where you feel the sensations of the in- and out-breaths.

Maintain mindfulness of your breathing as continuously as you can. The term *mindfulness* in this context refers to the faculty of focusing continuously upon a familiar, chosen object without dis-

traction. In Tibetan and Sanskrit, the word translated as *mindfulness* also means *remembering*. So the cultivation of mindfulness means maintaining an unbroken flow of remembering, remembering, remembering. It doesn't involve any internal commentary. You are simply remembering to attend to the stream of tactile sensations of the in- and out-breaths. The quality of awareness you are cultivating here is a kind of bare attention, a simple witnessing, with no mental analysis or conceptual elaboration. In addition to sustaining mindfulness, it's crucial to apply introspection intermittently throughout the session. This does not mean thinking about yourself. Rather, it is the internal monitoring of your mental state. By means of introspection, looking within, you can determine whether your attention has disengaged from the breath and has wandered off to sounds, other sensations in your body, or vagrant thoughts, memories, or anticipations of the future. Introspection entails quality control, monitoring the processes of both the mind and the body. From time to time, see if any tension has built up around your eyes or forehead. If so, release it. Let your face soften and relax. Then spend a few minutes seeing if you can divide your attention while remaining at ease. Be mindful of your breath, but also be aware of how your mind is operating.

Let me emphasize that this is not a concentration technique in the Western sense. We are not bearing down with tight, focused effort. It is essential to maintain a physical and mental sense of relaxation, and on that basis we gradually enhance the stability and then the vividness of attention. This entails a spacious quality of awareness, and within that spaciousness, a sense of openness and ease; mindfulness comes to rest on the breath, like a hand laid gently on a child's head. As the vividness of attention increases, you will notice sensations even between breaths. As the turbulence of the mind subsides, you will find that you can simply attend to the tactile sensations of the breath, rather than your thoughts about it.

I'll now introduce a technique you may find useful on occasion, a simple device of counting that, done with precision, may bring greater stability and continuity to your attention. Once again, with a luxurious sense of being at ease and giving your overworked

and overwrought conceptual mind a rest, place your attention on the tactile sensations of the breath. After exhaling, just as the next in-breath begins, mentally count “one.” Maintaining an erect posture, with the chest raised so the breath flows back in effortlessly, breathe in and follow the tactile sensations of the breath, letting your conceptual mind rest. Then experience the wonderful sense of refreshment as the breath is released, all the way out, until reaching the next turnaround point. Cultivate a “Teflon mind”—a mind to which nothing sticks, that doesn’t cling to thoughts about the present, past, or future. In this manner, count from one to ten. You may then repeat counting to ten, or continue counting up from ten to higher numbers. This is a practice of simplifying rather than suppressing your discursive mind. You are reducing mental activity to just counting, taking a holiday from compulsive thinking throughout the entire cycle of the breath. Practice for several minutes before ending this session.

To bring any worthy endeavor to a close in a meaningful fashion, Buddhists dedicate merit. Something has been drawn together in our hearts and minds by applying ourselves to this wholesome activity. After completing a meditation session, you may want to dwell for a minute or so to dedicate the merit of your practice, that it may lead to the fulfillment of whatever you find to be most meaningful for yourself and for others. With intention and attention, that goodness can be directed wherever we wish.

For Further Contemplation

The Buddha praised the practice of mindfulness of breathing as an exceptionally effective way to balance and purify the mind:

Just as in the last month of the hot season, when a mass of dust and dirt has swirled up, a great rain cloud out of season disperses it and quells it on the spot, so too concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial dwelling, and it disperses and quells on the spot unwholesome states whenever they arise.

In the practice of *shamatha* we consciously rest our awareness upon our breathing. The breath is like a steed and awareness is its rider. Attending to the breath is unlikely to arouse craving or aversion. Shifting into neutral, we neither aggravate nor distort the mind. Therefore, you might expect this practice to be rather boring. The object of attention doesn't seem very interesting, just the same old breath. And yet once you have developed some continuity, there are surprises in store. You will find a sense of well-being and balance that arises in a quiet, serene way, as if you are listening to waves rolling into shore. You can rest in that serenity and settle deeper and deeper. Your mind is like a stream, and you are simply not polluting it with distractions. Those who have studied the natural environment know that if you stop contaminating a polluted river, its self-purifying ability will come to the fore. The same is true for the natural healing properties of the mind.

We all know something about the earth's natural resources and the importance of conserving them, but don't we also have *internal* natural resources? Might not the mind, in a very practical, everyday sense, become its own source of well-being? Whenever I see His Holiness the Dalai Lama, I feel I am meeting a man whose heart, mind, and spirit are overflowing with uncontrived goodwill, compassion, and cheer. He must have done some extraordinary exploration of his inner resources to open up such a wellspring. Since we all have an eternal longing to find real satisfaction that fills the heart, a longing that looks for more than a continuous stream of pleasurable stimuli, for something deeper, something more fulfilling, how can we tap into that resource? *Shamatha* is like a drilling platform from which to begin fathoming our inner natural resources.

If you are drawn to the practice of breath awareness, do it for at least one session a day, though two would be best—one in the morning and one in the evening. Twenty-four minutes is a duration that Indian and Chinese yogis settled on independently. In ancient Chinese theory, it is said that twenty-four minutes is the duration required for the *qi*, or vital energies in your body, to go through one complete cycle. For the Indians the same time period was considered optimal for one's meditation sessions when one

first begins to practice. Later you may wish to extend this longer. Keep in mind that twenty-four minutes is only a small fraction of the approximately sixteen hours a day that you are awake. If that is the only spiritual practice you do, if there is no carryover to everything else, then no matter what happens in that twenty-four minutes, it will not have a very transformative effect on your life as a whole. There is just too much competition from the activities of the other fifteen and a half hours.

Mindfulness in Daily Life

Here are some guidelines drawn from the teachings of Asanga, a great fifth-century Indian Buddhist adept, that may help you extend your practice into daily life:

Restrain your six senses (mental awareness as well as the five physical senses) from objects that arouse craving or hostility. This doesn't mean that you should never be thinking about anything pleasant or unpleasant. Simply avoid dwelling on them in ways that upset the equilibrium of your mind. If you want to attend to them, do so, but don't feed the mental afflictions of attachment and aversion. That would be like polluting a mountain stream. Similarly, if you focus on things that are disappointing in yourself or in others, they will become your reality. So avoid dwelling on those things that arouse hostility, irritation, negativity, craving, anxiety, and grasping.

Furthermore, don't become attached to the input from your senses. When a monk walks down the road, he is to cast his gaze downward so that he doesn't focus on things that may catalyze craving or hostility. The point is this: don't go to places where you are bound to succumb to obsessive desires. Sensual craving is one of the five hindrances that the Buddha taught as obstructing the process of refining the attention. Another is malice. When you are troubled by someone's negative behavior toward you, attend to that person with compassion. Being dominated by angry, hateful thoughts simply poisons the mind. Protect your mind from malice as you would shelter a child from injury.

During ordinary activities, when you are walking, eating, or cleaning, bring greater mindfulness to your movements. Be mindful of your diet. Consume food that is not difficult to digest, and in quantities that are not too large or too small. If you want to turn eating into a Dharma event, partake of your food so that you can nourish your body and use it to be of service to the world. And get enough sleep. Even with the best of intentions, your practice will be impaired if you're not getting enough sleep. Try to fall asleep with wholesome thoughts. Provide yourself with an interval between sleep and your daily activities, with all of their concerns and responsibilities. It is optimal to meditate just before retiring.

It is often said that spiritual practice will not be fruitful over the long term unless you take satisfaction in it. Of course you will not enjoy every moment because sometimes the path gets rugged—not because Dharma is thorny, but because our habit-driven minds are. On the whole, it is important to find and follow a path that makes the heart sing. When breath awareness starts to go well, it becomes enjoyable. In simplicity you find that the scent of spiritual progress is strong and pure. But you can also develop an attachment to simplicity. You may start yearning for solitude and want to disengage from the world, thinking, “This feels so good—all I need is the breath.” That may alienate you, keeping you from engaging with others, making you less inclined to offer what you can to those around you. It's important not to devalue engagement with others or the reality of our interconnectedness with them. We have something to offer others and there is something to be received from them. That is a key element in the meaning of life, and you don't want to shut that out because you enjoy mindfulness of breathing so much.

Buddhism is not just meditation; nor, for that matter, is any contemplative path merely a set of techniques, a cookbook for the soul. Meditation becomes woven into the whole fabric of life. And, generally speaking, spiritual practice brings with it a mood of focusing critically on how we live. Why do we engage in the kinds of things we do from day to day? Among the many desires that come to mind and the many that we may pursue, are there some

that are not worth investing a life into, things that we do merely out of habit? Some desires, such as the wish to be a good father, mother, brother, or sister, are worthy aspirations. In your work, you want to do your job well and in a way that gives you satisfaction. Assuming the work is wholesome, there is value to that. But aren't there some desires that are more important than others, calling on us to prioritize and make sacrifices? The issue in spiritual practice in general is the simplification and prioritization of desires. What do we want most? Could some desires merely represent something else we really want? Notice how many people, especially well-known people who have made it to the top of their professions, fall into alcoholism and drug abuse? I was impressed when I recently heard the actress Gwyneth Paltrow comment in an interview that when it comes to being a celebrity with adoring fans and great wealth, "If that is all you have, you don't have much." May not some of us be striving diligently in the wrong directions, not being quite in touch with our true aspirations?

In my case, when I was twenty, I sensed that having a girlfriend, a car, a good education, and fine prospects for a successful career just wasn't enough. I discovered that fixation on the mundane, and the transient didn't ultimately deliver on the initial promises. So while we are immersed in the ongoing flux of the happiness and pain of life, the spirit of emergence can guide us in seeking out a path of increasing sanity. Keeping our feet on the ground, becoming psychologically more healthy and less neurotic—that alone will bring a greater sense of well-being. And there is a smooth curve flowing from mental health to spiritual maturation. That implies that even taking the first baby steps toward mental health is part of spiritual practice.

Going beyond desires for things that are merely symbols of true happiness leads to deeper understanding. We begin to see that we are interrelated with our fellow human beings, other sentient beings, the entire environment. We are now, and have always been, inextricably interconnected with those around us. In Buddhism the notion of an isolated, independent individual, an autonomous ego, is not based on reality. Such an ego has never existed; it's nothing more than a habitual mental construct, and a

deluded one at that. This assertion is more than merely a belief; it is a working hypothesis that we will carefully examine as we proceed through these practices, not merely accepting anything as dogma. If we are interrelated from our core, and we return to the question *What do we seek?* our search is not for ourselves alone but for ourselves in relation to all others. The questions become, "What do I seek in relationship to you?" "How can we venture together?" As soon as possible, cultivate an altruistic motivation for your practice of mindfulness of breathing and for whatever other practice you do. Aspire to bring forth the full capacity of your own buddha-nature. Manifest it completely, whatever that might entail. As a result, you will experience a capacity for compassion, for wisdom, and for energy, or power of the spirit itself, power to heal, and power to create.

How can this be unveiled? By simplifying and focusing our desires in the same manner as we cultivate attention. Eventually a point is reached where all our other desires become derivatives of the one wish: "May I realize perfect spiritual awakening for the benefit of all beings." That is the simple, single desire of *bodhichitta*, the spirit of awakening. Then, when that is the only desire that lingers, for a moment release it. Let it go and just be present. Similarly, when you focus the attention, when the mind settles, becomes more centered on the breath, release that. Release and be present in the sheer state of being aware. That will reveal to you the very nature of awareness itself.