



# BEFRIENDING THE BREATH

## Reflection...

We spend much of our waking life lost in thought. Our minds are often scattered and busy because they are constantly working away in the background - on auto-pilot, helping us to complete unfinished tasks, working through issues from the past, and planning and preparing for future events or goals. But this can be exhausting and can lead to excessive worrying, agitation, anxiety, tiredness, and stress, especially if the mind gets 'hooked' on certain themes or stuck in certain well-worn ruts.

How can we kindly and gently 'manage our minds' so as not to get so 'lost' and 'overwhelmed'? Mindfulness meditation is not about suppressing thoughts or emptying the mind, but about developing a better understanding of our mind's habits and gently training the attention to be where we choose for it to be. The breath is a useful tool and ally in this process.

## The Breath – Karen Ryder

Breath is life. You could think of the breath as being like a thread or chain that links and connects all the events of your life from birth, the beginning, to death, the end. The breath is always there every moment, moving by itself like a river.

Have you ever noticed how the breath changes with our moods -- short and shallow when we're tense or angry, faster when we're excited, slow and full when we're happy, and almost disappearing when we're afraid. It's there with us all the time. It can be used as a tool, like an anchor, to bring stability to the body and mind when we deliberately choose to become aware of it. We can tune into it at any moment during everyday life.

Mostly, we're not in touch with our breathing -- it's just there, forgotten. So, one of the first things we do in mindfulness is to get in touch with it. We notice how the breath changes with our moods, our thoughts, our body movements. We don't have to control the breath. Just notice it and get to know it, like a friend.

## Meditation

Spend a little time making yourself comfortable and arriving in this space and in this moment. If you are sitting in a chair, ensuring that the feet are flat on the floor, and that the hands are resting in the lap or on the thighs. Moving the back so that it is upright and straight, but not forced in any way, and adjusting the neck and head so that they are aligned with the back, with the chin tucked slightly in. Allowing the chest to be open, perhaps taking a few slightly deeper breaths so that it gently expands, and on the out-breath, allowing the shoulders to let go, soften, and drop. And, if it feels okay for you, allowing the eyes to close.

And beginning to settle and sense into the body sitting here. Feeling the weight of the body pressing down and becoming aware of the space the body is taking up, the space the body is

inhabiting in this moment. And perhaps also becoming aware of the space beyond the body and the different sounds coming and going within this space. There is no need to get involved with these sounds, just noticing them arising, staying awhile, and then disappearing again.

And then gently redirecting your attention back to the body and noticing how the body feels in this moment. Is there a sense of heaviness or lightness, tiredness or energy, tension or ease, stillness or restlessness? Remembering that there is no right or wrong way to feel, whatever you notice is your experience in this moment. Seeing if you can turn towards whatever is present with interest, rather than with an attitude of needing to change or 'fix'. So, inviting you to gently scan down through the body, starting at the top of the head and moving downwards towards the toes, just noticing how things are in your body in this moment.

And setting an intention for this practice – perhaps inviting yourself to take this time to get more familiar with the anchor of the breath. To get to know the breath as if it were a friend, by bringing a patient and kind interest to its comings and goings. Allowing it to be just as it is and not trying to change it in any way.

So gathering your attention now, and bringing it to the breath - wherever you notice it most clearly as it moves in and out of the body.

This might be the sensations of the breath moving in and out of the nostrils close to the tip of your nose. Cool air moving in on the in-breath, and slightly warmer air moving out on the out-breath.

Or it might be the faint sensation of air moving at the back of the throat as you breathe in and as you breathe out.

Or you might notice the breath most clearly in the chest. The stretching and rising sensations of the ribcage on the in-breath, and the falling away sensations on the out-breath.

Or, if your abdominal muscles are relaxed, you might notice a gentle stretching in the belly as you breathe in and a pulling back as you breathe out.

So, choosing a place where you can comfortably rest your attention on the breath, the nostrils, throat, chest or abdomen. Then simply follow the journey of each in-breath and each out-breath. Notice the beginning of each in-breath, the path it follows and its end. Then notice the beginning of the out-breath, the path it follows and its end. Become interested in the changing sensations, and how each breath can be subtly different from the last.

And you might also become aware of the small pause between the in-breath and the out-breath, and the small pause between the out-breath and the next in-breath.

You might also notice that the mind has wandered away from the breath. Perhaps it has got caught up in planning, daydreaming, worrying or self-criticism. This is quite normal. The noticing means that you have already 'woken up' and this is what meditation is all about – noticing the habits of our minds and then gently and kindly redirecting them to where we had intended them to be, which in this instance is observing the breath.

There is no need to change the way you breathe, to breathe more deeply or more slowly. All you need to do is watch. If paying close attention to the breath is difficult, evoking feelings of anxiety

for example, you might choose to follow the breath from a distance perhaps noticing how clothing moves with each in-breath and out-breath, or how the back of the shoulders and tops of the arms rise and fall. Or you might prefer to keep your breath in the background of your awareness and return to a different bodily anchor, perhaps bringing awareness to sensations in the bottom of the feet, or your thighs and bottom on the seat, or sensations in the hands.

Then, inviting you to expand your attention so that you become aware of the whole column of breath. The sensations of the in-breath and the out-breath moving through the nostrils, the throat, the chest, and the abdomen.

Then, expanding the awareness outwards again to take in the whole body sitting here. Becoming aware once more of the body's posture, the space that the body is taking up, and the contact that the body is making with the surfaces beneath it. And becoming aware of the breath moving throughout the whole body. Subtle sensations of movement throughout the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. As you breathe in, the breath expanding outwards right up to the edge of the skin, and then falling away again as you breathe out.

### ***Where is the mind?***

*Mind wandering is a normal part of meditation practice and all that we need to do is to notice when it has happened, and the nature of what has distracted us. Perhaps we have become lost in thought, planning, remembering, rehearsing, worrying or daydreaming. Or perhaps a sound or a body sensation distracted us and set off a chain of internal dialogue. Whatever the distraction, the instruction is the same, note where the mind has gone, gently unhook without self-criticism (mind-wandering is what minds are designed to do!), and then **return the attention to where we had intended it to be**. We may need to do this many times during a practice, and this is why learning to be patient and kind with ourselves are important mindfulness skills!*

### Poem

Walk Slowly – Danna Faulds

It only takes a reminder to breathe,  
a moment to be still, and just like that,  
something in me settles, softens, makes  
space for imperfection. The harsh voice  
of judgment drops to a whisper and I  
remember again that life isn't a relay  
race; that we will all cross the finish  
line; that waking up to life is what we  
were born for. As many times as I forget,  
catch myself charging forward  
without even knowing where I'm going,  
that many times I can make the choice  
to stop, to breathe, and be, and walk  
slowly into the mystery.