

MINDFULNESS WITH BREATHING : GETTING STARTED

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Sit up straight (with all the vertebrae of the spine fitting together snugly). Keep your head upright. Direct your eyes towards the tip of your nose so that nothing else is seen. Whether you see it or not doesn't really matter, just gaze in its direction. Once you get used to it, the results will be better than closing the eyes, and you won't be encouraged to fall asleep so easily. In particular, people who are sleepy should practice with their eyes open rather than closed. Practice like this steadily and they will close by themselves when the time comes for them to close. (If you want to practice with your eyes closed from the start, that's up to you.) Still, the method of keeping the eyes open gives better results. Some people, however, will feel that it's too difficult, especially those who are attached to closing their eyes. They won't be able to practice with their eyes open, and may close them if they wish.

Lay the hands in your lap, comfortably, one on top of the other. Overlap or cross your legs in a way that distributes and holds your weight well, so

that you can sit comfortably and will not fall over easily. The legs can be overlapped in an ordinary way or crossed, whichever you prefer or are able to do. Fat people can only cross their legs in what is called the "diamond posture" (lotus posture) with difficulty, but fancy postures are not necessary. Merely sit with the legs folded so that your weight is evenly balanced and you cannot tip over easily -- that's good enough. The more difficult and serious postures can be left for when one gets serious, like a yogi.

In special circumstances -- when you are sick, not feeling well, or just tired -- you can rest against something, sit on a chair, or use a deck chair, in order to recline a bit. Those who are sick can even lie down to meditate.

Sit in a place with good air circulation, where you can breathe comfortably. There should be nothing overly disturbing. Loud noises which are steady and have no meaning, such as the sound of waves or a factory, are no problem unless you attach to them as a problem. Sounds with meaning, such as people speaking, are more of a problem for those just learning to practice. If you can't find a quiet place, pretend there aren't any sounds. Just be determined to practice and it will work out eventually.

Although the eyes are gazing inattentively at the tip of the nose, you can gather your attention or awareness or sati(*), as it's called in our technical language, in order to catch and note your own breathing in and out. (Those who like to close their eyes will do so from here on.) Those who prefer to leave the eyes open will do so continually until the eyes gradually close on their own as concentration and calmness (samadhi) increases.

[* Sati is a key term in Buddhist meditation. It means "recall, recollection, awareness, attention, mindfulness." All of these concern the present and do not involve memory or thought. In this article, the activity of sati is conveyed through a number of verbs: to fix, to note, to attend, to pay attention, to be aware, to experience. (Sati does not mean "to concentrate or focus.") Please study these various words and their meaning in each context, then you will have a correct understanding of sati, namely, what it is and how to use it to get free of dukkha.]

In the beginning (and only at the beginning, for a few minutes, not forever!), to make it easy to note the breathing, try to breathe as long as you can. Force it in and out strongly many times. Do so in order to know clearly for yourself what the breath rubs against or touches as it draws in and out along its path. In a simple way, notice where it appears to end in the belly (by taking the physical sensations as one's measure rather than anatomical reality). Note this in an easy-going way as well as you can, well enough to fix the inner and outer end points of the breathing. Don't be tense or too strict about it.

Most people will feel the breath striking at the tip of the nose and should take that point as the outer end. (In people with flat or upturned noses the breath will strike on the edge of the upper lip, and they should take that as the external end.) Now you will have both outer and inner end points by fixing one point at the tip of the nose and the other at the navel. The breath will drag itself back and forth between these two points. Here

make your mind just like something which chases after or stalks the breathing, like a tiger or a spy, unwilling to part with it even for a moment, following every breath for as long as you meditate. This is the first step of our practice. We call it "chasing after (or stalking) the whole time."

Earlier we said to begin by trying to make the breathing as long as possible, and as strong, vigorous, and rough as possible, many times from the very start. Do so in order to find the end points and the track the breath follows between them. Once the mind (or sati) can catch and fix the breathing in and out -- by constantly being aware of how the breath touches and flows, then where it ends, then how it turns back either inside or outside -- you can gradually relax the breathing until it becomes normal no longer forcing or pushing it in any way. Be careful: don't force or control it at all! Still, sati fixes on the breathing the whole time, just as it did earlier with the rough and strong breathing.

Sati is able to pay attention to the entire path of the breath from the inner end point (the navel or the base of the abdomen) to the outer end point (the tip of the nose or the upper lip). However fine or soft the breath becomes, sati can clearly note it all the time. If it happens that we cannot note (or feel) the breath because it is too soft or refined, then breathe more strongly or roughly again. (But not as strong or rough as before, just enough to note the breath clearly). Fix attention on the breathing again, until sati is aware of it without any gaps. Make sure it can be done well, that is, keep practicing until even the purely ordinary, unforced breathing can be securely observed. However long or short it is, know it. However heavy or light it is, know it. Know it clearly within that very awareness as sati merely holds closely to and follows the breathing back and forth the whole time you are meditating (*). When you can do this it means success in the level of preparation called "chasing after all the time."

[* Don't try to push other things out of awareness, that will create tension. Just keep your attention centered on the breathing in a balanced way. Let go of anything that takes you away from the breathing.]

Lack of success is due to the inability of sati (or the attention) to stay with the breathing the whole time. You don't know when it lost track. You don't know when it ran off to home, work, or play. You don't know until it's already gone. And you don't know when it went, how, why, or whatever. Once you are aware of what happened, catch the breathing again, gently bring it back to the breathing, and train until successful on this level. Do it for at least ten minutes each session, before going on to the next step.

The next step, the second level of preparation, is called "waiting (or guarding) in ambush at one point." It's best to practice this second step only after the first step can be done well, but anyone who can skip straight to the second won't be scolded. At this stage, sati (or recollection) lies in wait fixing at a particular point and stops chasing after the breathing. Note the sensation when the breathing enters the body all the way (to the navel or thereabouts) once, then let go or release it. Next, note when the breathing contacts the other end point (the tip of the nose) once more, then let go or leave it alone until it contacts the inner end point (navel) again. Continue like this without changing anything. In moments of letting go, the mind doesn't run away to home, the fields, the office, or anywhere. This

means that sati pays attention at the two end points -- both inner and outer -- and doesn't pay attention to anything between them.

When you can securely go back and forth between the two end points without paying attention to things in between, leave out the inner end point and focus only on the outer, namely, the tip of the nose. Now, sati consistently watches only at the tip of the nose. Whether the breathing strikes while inhaling or while exhaling, know it every time. This is called "guarding the gate." There's a feeling as the breathing passes in or out; the rest of the way is left void or quiet. If you have firm awareness at the nose tip, the breathing becomes increasingly calm and quiet. Thus you can't feel movements other than at the nose tip. In the spaces when it's empty or quiet, when you can't feel anything, the mind doesn't run away to home or elsewhere. The ability to do this well is success in the "waiting in ambush at one point" level of preparation.

Lack of success is when the mind runs away without you knowing. It doesn't return to the gate as it should or, after entering the gate, it sneaks all the way inside. Both of these errors happen because the period of emptiness or quiet is incorrect and incomplete. You have not done it properly since the start of this step. Therefore, you ought to practice carefully, solidly, expertly from the very first step.

Even the beginning step, the one called "chasing after the whole time," is not easy for everyone. Yet when one can do it, the results -- both physical and mental -- are beyond expectations. So you ought to make yourself able to do it, and do it consistently, until it is a game like the sports you like to play. If you have even two minutes, by all means practice. Breathe forcefully, if your bones crack or rattle that's even better. Breathe strongly until it whistles, a little noise won't hurt. Then relax and lighten it gradually until it finds its natural level.

The ordinary breathing of most people is not natural or normal, but is coarser or lower than normal, without us being aware. (*) Especially when we do certain activities or are in positions which are restricted, our breathing is more or less coarse than it ought to be, although we don't know it. So you ought to start with strong, vigorous breathing first, then let it relax until it becomes natural. In this way, you'll end up with breathing which is the "middle way" or just right. Such breathing makes the body natural, normal, and healthy. And it is fit for use as the object of meditation at the beginning of anapanasati (**). Let us stress once more that this first step of preparation ought to be practiced until it's just a natural game for every one of us, and in all circumstances. This will bring numerous physical and mental benefits.

[* In fact, our breathing tends to be unhealthy, which contributes to many physical and mental problems. Please learn to breathe freely and naturally.]

[** "anapanasati" is the Pali term for the practice of mindfulness with breathing (the very subject of this essay)]

Actually, the difference between "chasing after the whole time" and "waiting in ambush at one place" is not so great. The latter is a little more relaxed and subtle, that is, the area noted by sati decreases. To make this

easier to understand, we'll use the simile of the baby sitter rocking the baby's hammock. (*) At first, when the child has just been put into the hammock, it isn't sleepy yet and will try to get out. At this stage, the baby sitter must watch the hammock carefully. As it swings from side to side, her head must turn from left to right so that the child won't be out of sight for a moment. Once the baby begins to get sleepy and doesn't try to get out anymore, the baby sitter need not turn her head from left to right, back and forth, as the hammock swings. The baby sitter only watches when the hammock passes in front of her face, which is good enough. Watching only at one point while the hammock is in front of her face, the baby won't have a chance to get out of the hammock just the same, because the child is ready to fall asleep. (Although the baby will fall asleep, the meditator should not!)

[* In India and Thailand small hammocks are used instead of cradles.]

The first stage of preparation in noting the breathing -- "chasing after the whole time" -- is like when the baby sitter must turn her head from side to side with the swinging hammock so that it isn't out of sight for a moment. The second stage where the breathing is noted at the nose tip -- "waiting and watching at one point" -- is like when the baby is ready to sleep and the baby sitter watches the hammock only when it passes her face.

When you have practiced and trained fully in the second step, you can train further by making the area noted by sati even more subtle and gentle until there is secure, stable concentration. Then concentration can be deepened step by step until attaining one of the jhanas (*), which, for most people, is beyond the rather easy concentration of the first steps. The jhanas are a refined and precise subject with strict requirements and subtle principles. One must be strongly interested and committed for that level of practice. At this stage, just be constantly interested in the basic steps until they become familiar and ordinary. Then you might be able to gather in the higher levels later.

[* The jhanas are states of one-pointedness which result from highly developed concentration which is turned inward. In them one is only aware of a particular object and certain mental factors.]

May ordinary lay people give themselves the chance to meditate in a way which has many benefits both physically and mentally, and which satisfies the basic needs of our practice, before going on to more difficult things. May you train with these first steps in order to be fully equipped with sila (morality), samadhi (concentration), and panna (wisdom), that is, to be fully grounded in the noble eightfold path. Even if only a start, this is better than not going anywhere. Your body will become more healthy and peaceful than usual by training in successively higher levels of samadhi. You will discover something that everyone should find in order to not waste the opportunity of having been born.