

Introduction to Meditation Guided Meditation on the Breath

Sit either on your cushion or a chair. Create a posture of awareness, stable, alert and relaxed. Cultivate a balance between being alert and relaxed. This balance is important. Close your eyes. If you choose to keep your eyes open entrain your gaze downward without trying to focus or drifting your head forward. Please remember that the most basic thing we're doing is simply noticing, knowing, what is happening in the present moment. It's really simple. Before you have any ideas about getting concentrated or being peaceful or making something happen – just noticing. So you might take a moment now just notice how you are, what's going on for you, what is your living experience is, here and now. . . .

And as you pay attention to here and now, how easy is it to stay here and now? Are you operating on any ideas that something is supposed to happen? Trying to accomplish something, more than just noticing?

In order to help us settle in and get connected to the present moment, it's often helpful at the beginning of a meditation session to take a few long slow deep breaths. Breathing in deeply, and then as you exhale, relax your body. Letting go of whatever tension you can.

Now allow your breathing to return to normal. For mindfulness meditation we are not making any effort at all to breathe in any special way. See if you can let go of any special breathing techniques you may have experienced. Only feel breathing just as it is. We just let ourselves breathe whatever way we are.

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Briefly travel your awareness through your body once more, to see if there are any places where you can relax. It might be possible to smooth your forehead, relax your eyes. It might be possible to loosen or soften your jaw. You can release any tension in the tongue. Many of us hold tension in our shoulders. Even if it's not possible to relax the shoulders, there might be a softening around the areas of tension in your shoulders. Perhaps you can relax a little around the chest. Relax your belly. Letting your abdominal wall be at ease . . .

So first, breathing in deeply, and second you are breathing normally, and just scanning the body and relaxing softening whatever you can. And then next, see if you can get a global awareness of your body. You don't have to try too hard, just whatever broad awareness of your body that you can establish, letting your attention wander around your body, sensing it from the inside. Feeling the body's contact with the chair or cushion.

Then become aware of how your body experiences breathing. How does your body know that you are breathing or feel that you are breathing? What happens in your body as you breathe? What moves, what changes, what shifts?

Some people can feel the movement of their belly going up and down, rising and falling, or the chest rising and falling, the rib cage expanding and contracting.

Some people can feel the air coming in and out of the nostrils. If you have trouble finding your breath, or connecting to the experience of breathing, you can put your hand perhaps on your diaphragm or belly, and then perhaps feel the movement there.

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So wherever you feel your breathing most predominantly in your body, let that be your home base. You're going to try to cultivate your ability to stay in the present moment for the experience of breathing in that place. Feeling the shifts and changes, the in breath and the out breath.

There might be a variety of things that might make it difficult for you to stay continuous with the breathing. Be relaxed about that. The idea is to just know what is happening. You can know "I'm distracted. I'm concerned about other things." Just know that. The mind so easily just wanders off in thought. The moment you notice that happening, then gently, smilingly, bring your attention back to your breathing. Take your awareness and attention and enter the experience of breathing, as if it's something you can deeply trust. A good place to be.

Try to notice, when you wander off in thought, then soften and relax back to the breath. When you connect to the breathing again, stay with it, do it with some sense of determination to stay attuned with breathing, so you stay aware of many in-breaths and out-breaths in a row.

You might have various concerns or issues that are calling for attention. See if you can let them be in the background. In the foreground, you are just tuning in to breathing. Being with the breath. Being with the rhythm of breathing in and out. Being with the physical experience of breathing. Perhaps as you do that, just being with it, is a little calming or settling.

Some people find it helpful to silently and softly label the in-breath "in", the out-breath "out", or as their chest or belly rises to say "rising" or as it falls, say

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“falling”. Just a very quiet whisper in the mind that just encourages you to stay present, instead of getting distracted.

We'll sit for two more minutes, in these last couple of minutes see if you can stay connected to the breath, to the breathing.

And then just as it's useful to take a few minutes to settle into meditation, it's useful to take a little bit of time to come out of it. A simple way to do this is to take a few deep breaths again. Feel your body as you breathe in deeply, and then when you're ready you can open your eyes. Stretch out your legs if needed.