

Mindfulness of Breathing

Friends of the Western Buddhist Order

In the mindfulness of breathing practice, we work on the development of our awareness by cultivating the faculty of mindfulness. This practice leads to a calm, re-collected state of mind in which there is also vitality and clarity. We feel more concentrated as our attention rests more and more on the experience of the breath.

Our awareness, or our personal experience of ourselves, is based in the six senses, i.e. the five physical senses and the mind. Our awareness changes from moment to moment as our senses take in new impressions, and as our attention shifts from one thing to another. Positively considered, this shifting of attention from sense to sense and from object to object contributes to our overall experience of awareness. Negatively considered, we live in a state of distraction. Our attention span is short, and our minds wander from one sense-attraction to another.

Mindfulness is the opposite of distraction. It is the ability to maintain a continuity of attention and be well-composed, with our minds not wandering haplessly about. The more mindful we are, the more aware we can be of ourselves and beyond ourselves.

In the mindfulness of breathing practice, we use the breath as an object of attention. We shouldn't force concentration by fixing our attention on the breath and holding it determinedly. We just watch the breath come and go with a relaxed, open mind. We may then find ourselves becoming more attuned to the rhythm and flow of the breath, and more aware of the subtle sensations of the breathing.

The Practice

There are four stages to the practice. Each stage helps us become progressively more concentrated in the experience of the breath.

1st Stage. We count our breaths to help us connect with it. Just watch the breath come and go, in its own natural rhythm. We count at the end of each outgoing breath, and count ten breaths in this way. Then we count another ten breaths, and continue counting in this way. So,

Breathe in, breathe out, and count 1
Breathe in, breathe out, and count 2 ... and so on up to...
Breathe in, breathe out, and count 10 then
Breathe in, breathe out, and count 1
... and continue counting in ten-breath cycles.

2nd Stage. We change to counting the breath just before the incoming breath. It's a small change, but it creates a different emphasis in the way we pay attention.

Count 1, breathe in, breathe out
Count 2, breathe in breathe out ... and so on up to 10
... and continue counting in ten-breath cycles.

3rd Stage. We let go of the counting and simply watch the breath come and go. We try to keep up a continuous awareness of the breathing. We try to be aware of the whole sensation of the breathing, and aware of the space between breaths.

4th Stage. We focus our attention on the sensations felt near the tip of the nose, or on the lips, as our breath comes and goes. There's no need to strain on this fine point -- just keep up a relaxed attention.

What is Meditation?

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Do you have peace of mind? Are you able to remain centered and not get easily distracted? Are you able to manage the stresses of the modern world and find joy in the moment-to-moment experience of your life?

Usually the mind is whirling around in a stream of consciousness that reflects our lifelong conditioning. We have learned to identify with this surface chaos. With the help of meditation, we can access the calm beneath the surface and get in touch with our true nature.

With the proper energy and commitment, you can experience the benefits of meditation. These benefits include enhanced calmness, relaxation, and clarity of understanding. By purposefully reducing your internal chatter, you become more aware of how the mind works and how mental conditioning triggers reactions. Most of the time we operate with little awareness of this process.

When the mind operates with awareness, we experience the space between our thoughts. With more space come options, which in turn provides the opportunity for a more creative life. Imagine a life influenced by a continuous stream of awareness, each moment filled with creative possibilities. Imagine clearly seeing the choices before you, and mindfully being able to choose those options that bring benefit as opposed to harm.

Meditation is a means of transforming the mind. It takes us from a lower state of being to a higher one, eventually from an unenlightened state to an enlightened one.

All spiritual paths include some type of meditation which come in many different forms. They variously use visualization, music, sound, chanting, emotions, or breathing as the object of concentration. The actual practice of meditation involves patiently bringing the active and wandering mind back, again and again, to the object of concentration.

The two forms of meditation taught by the Friends of the Western Buddhist Order (FWBO) are the “Mindfulness of Breathing” and the “Metta Bhavana” (development of universal loving-kindness). The Mindfulness of Breathing uses the breath as the object of concentration, and the Metta Bhavana uses certain positive emotions. Both of these meditations originated over 2500 years ago. They have been practiced over the centuries by countless numbers of people who, like us, were courageously determined to create for themselves a more conscious and peaceful existence.