

Mindfulness With Breathing: Getting Started

Sit up straight with all the vertebrae of the spine fitting together snugly. Keep the head upright, with the eyes looking toward the tip of the nose. Whether you see it or not doesn't really matter, just gaze in the direction of the nose or past it. Once you get used to it, the results will be better than closing the eyes, and you won't be inclined to fall asleep so easily. In particular, people who are sleepy will benefit from keeping the eyes open at the beginning rather than closing them. 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.)

Lay the hands in the lap, comfortably, one on top of the other, or lay them comfortably on your thighs or knees, whichever is most simple and comfortable for you. Overlap or cross the 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, again, whichever you prefer or are able to do. Stout people can only cross their legs in what is called the "diamond posture" (lotus posture) with difficulty, but anyway fancy postures are not necessary. Merely sit with the back upright and the legs folded so that 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. You can also meditate while standing.

Sit in a place with good air circulation, where you can breathe comfortably. There should be nothing overly disturbing, but don't expect perfect quiet. 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. However, 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 gaze inattentively toward the tip of the nose, you can gather your attention or awareness or *sati*,¹ 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 (*samàdhi*) increases.

To make it easier to note the breathing, in the beginning – and only at the beginning, say for a few minutes, five or ten at the most – try to breathe as long and deep 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 an anatomical picture in your head). Note in an easy-going way as well as you can, good enough to fix the inner and outer end points of the breathing. Don't be tense – that is, too strict or too precise – about it. Your meditation should always be relaxed and natural.

Most people will feel the breath striking at the tip of the nose and should take that point as the outer end of the breath's path. 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 there will be 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

¹ *Sati* is a key term in Buddhist meditation. It means "recall, recollection, full 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," which is *samàdhi*.) 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.

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 "constantly chasing after (or stalking)."

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 over from the very start. Do so in order to find the end points and the path 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 and natural. There is no longer any need to force or push it in any way. Be careful now: don't force or control the breathing at all! Still, *sati* fixes on the breathing the whole time, just as it did earlier with the rough and strong breathing but now more calmly.

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 back and forth with the breathing the whole time you are meditating.² When you can do this it means success in the level of preparation called "constantly chasing after."

Lack of success is due to the inability of *sati* (or attention) to stay with the breathing the whole time. You don't know when it lost track. You don't know when the mind 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 immediate recollection) lies in wait fixing at a particular point and stops chasing after the breathing. To switch to this level or method begin by noting the sensation where the breathing enters the body and remain there as it flows all the way to the navel or thereabouts, then let go of this outer point and put the mind at the inner point. Remain here until the exhalation contacts the other end point (the tip of the nose) and remain there for the rest of the exhalation, then let go or leave it alone when the breathing 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 off with the inner end point and focus only at 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.

² 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, one breath at a time. Let go of anything that takes you away from the breathing.

Lack of success occurs 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. This means that 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 in order to lay a good foundation in your practice. Try it again until you get it.

Even the beginning step, the one called "constantly chasing after," 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 gradually relax and lighten it until it finds its natural level.

The ordinary breathing of most people is not natural or normal, but is more coarse or shallow than "normal," without us being aware.³ Especially when we do certain activities or are in positions which are restricted, our breathing is more 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 *ānāpānasati*. Let us stress once more that this kind 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.

Actually, the difference between "constantly chasing after" 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 mother rocking the baby's hammock.⁴ At first, when the child has just been put in the hammock, it isn't sleepy yet and will try to get out. At this stage, the mother 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 mother need not turn her head from left to right, back and forth, as the hammock swings. The mother only watches when the hammock passes in front of her face, which is good enough. Watching only at one point while the hammock is directly in front of her, 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 may fall asleep, the meditator should not!)

The first stage of preparation in noting the breathing – "constantly chasing after" – is like when the mother 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 mother watches the hammock only when it passes right in front of her.

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 there. Then concentration can be deepened step by step until attaining one of the *jhānas*,⁵ which is beyond the rather easy concentration of the first steps and is rather difficult for most people. The *jhānas* are a refined and precise matter with strict requirements and subtle principles. One must have strong interest and commitment for that level of practice. For now, just be consistently interested in the basic steps until they become familiar and

3 In fact, our breathing tends to be unhealthy, which contributes to many physical and mental problems. Please learn to breathe freely and naturally. It may require time and patience, but the nature of us all is to breathe and live freely, naturally, peacefully.

4 In India and Thailand small hammocks are used rather than cradles.

5 The *jhānas* are states of one-pointedness (unification-integration) which result from highly developed concentration that has turned inward. In them one is only aware of a particular object and certain mental factors, but nothing external, not even one's own body.

ordinary. Then you might be able gather in the higher levels later.

May all people give themselves the chance to meditate in a way which has many physical and mental benefits. Meditation is not just for nuns and monks, or for special people; it is for everyone. May we all give ourselves the chance to satisfy 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 *sāla* (morality), *samādhi* (concentration), and *paññā* (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 *samādhi*. You will discover something that everyone should find in order to not waste the opportunity of having been born.

by Buddhadhāsa Bhikkhu

(adapted and translated by Santikaro Bhikkhu)