

The Mindfulness of Breathing

This practice helps us to develop a calm and concentrated mind. We learn to pull together the many scattered fragments of our emotional and mental energy into a single unified whole, with the natural consequence that our minds become more energised, focused, and wholehearted, and therefore, that our experience of life becomes clearer and more vivid, our choices more conscious and more meaningful. Some traditions say the Buddha was doing this practice as he became Enlightened.

This practice makes a very good companion to the Metta Bhavana. Both were taught and strongly recommended by the Buddha. We suggest that anyone developing a serious meditation practice alternates them equally.

Summary of the four stages of the practice:

- Begin by setting up your meditation posture and sitting quietly for a minute or two, to relax and settle yourself. Check your body for tension, and become aware of its general level of energy. Check the overall tone of your energy, emotions, and mental activity, acknowledging these as your starting point for this particular session of meditation.

1 Feel the sensation of the breathing as it flows naturally in and out of the body. Just after each breath leaves the body, mark it with a (mental) count of 'one', then 'two', etc. Count ten breaths, then start again at one.

2 After doing this for a short while (say 4-5 minutes) start counting each breath just before it enters the body, counting in the same way as before.

3 After a few minutes of stage 2, stop counting altogether, and simply follow with your mind the whole flow of your breathing.

4 Finally, direct your attention to the point where you most clearly feel the air entering and leaving the body. Focus your attention on the subtle sensations made by the air stimulating that point.

- To end the practice, relax your effort and sit quietly doing nothing for a minute or two, absorbing the effects of the practice, and gradually allowing your attention to expand out again into your surroundings. It is important to end slowly and sensitively. Take time to reflect on how it went.

Throughout the practice, keep an overall perspective on how it is going, and look for ways to move into deeper states of concentration. These include adjusting your posture to balance energy that is too sluggish or too excited, consciously developing interest in your experience, and looking for enjoyment in the practice.