

CHAPTER 3

The Breath Meditation

Mindfully he breathes in and mindfully he breathes out. When inhaling a long breath, he thinks: 'I am inhaling a long breath.' When exhaling a long breath, he thinks: 'I am exhaling a long breath.' Likewise, he knows when he is breathing in or out a short breath. He is like a skilled turner who knows when he is making a long or short turn on the lathe.

– *The Satipatthana Sutta*. Page 90

We can define meditation very simply. It is to focus on the breath or on the body in some way. This is a crude but remarkably adequate definition. There are dozens of possible ways of doing this but they all have the same *modus operandi*.

Meditation trains us to feel our bodies more vividly from the inside. In particular we learn to read the real-time, ever-changing sensations coming from the musculature and the internal organs. This is how we become mindful of tension, arousal, energy levels, balance, pain, comfort and the quality of our health at any moment. This cognitive process is called 'interoception' (literally: 'inner-perception') and it makes our mental map of our bodies more accessible to consciousness.

The technical name for this mental map is the 'body schema'¹. It is in fact a composite image. Signals from the musculature are mapped in the somatosensory cortex. Signals from the viscera are mapped in the insula. Other signals are mapped elsewhere in the brain. Nonetheless, we always sense the body schema as an integrated whole.

¹ The term 'body schema' was originally confined to just the somatosensory system. I'm using the term, as many now do, to include all forms of internal sensing.

Over time a meditator cultivates a rich attunement to his body schema, almost without realising it. Simply paying good attention to the body for long enough will eventually achieve this result. Many of the lasting benefits of meditation rely on this feeling of being ‘grounded’ or ‘centred’ or ‘embodied.’ This deeper familiarity with the body is another reason why it feels so good to meditate.

Some people prefer to meditate on the breath. Others prefer to explore the body. Thus we have Breath Meditations and Bodyscan Meditations. The distinction is somewhat arbitrary since each implies the other. We couldn’t focus on the breath without also being aware of the body, and vice versa. It is simply a question of which is consciously in the foreground and which is in the background. Focusing on either is guaranteed to strengthen our conscious perception of the body schema.

The Breath Meditation is easy to understand and do. The Bodyscan is more complex and thorough. In the *Sutta*, the Buddha starts with the Breath Meditation and develops it immediately into the Bodyscan meditation. In two other important *sutta*² from the Pali Canon, ‘Mindfulness of the Breath’ and ‘Mindfulness of the Body’, he treats them as entirely separate meditations. These two practices go back thousands of years, and each of them has many variants. The *Satipatthana Sutta* is thus the direct source of the practices taught on 10-day Vipassana retreats and also those in the MBSR program that introduced mindfulness to psychology.

Because it is simpler to describe, focusing on the breath is often regarded as a virtual definition of meditation. This is a mistake. Meditating is more about cultivating total body-awareness, and the cognitive skill of focusing itself. The breath is just one point of entry into the body schema. Nor does the breath meditation suit everyone. Many people actively dislike it and much prefer scanning the body. Focusing on the breath can make them more, not less, anxious for reasons I won’t go into here, and many can’t escape the trap of trying to breathe ‘correctly.’

We can make another distinction. The Bodyscan is a superb way of releasing subtle *muscle tension*. It works directly on the musculoskeletal system. As soon as we notice unnecessary muscle tension, it is easy to start releasing it. To give the body more attention than usual, as we do

² The word *sutta* with lower-case ‘s’ refers to any of the texts in the Pali Canon. The ‘Mindfulness of the Breath’ *sutta* is No. 118 in *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995). The ‘Mindfulness of the Body’ *sutta* is No. 119 in the same collection.

when we meditate, accelerates the self-corrective feedback mechanisms, and this effect pervades the whole body.

The Breath Meditation however is more effective than the Bodyscan at lowering *arousal*. It works through the visceral organs and the Autonomic Nervous System rather than the musculature. Breathing is intimately connected to heart rate, blood pressure and the secretions of adrenaline and cortisol. These are all governed by what is called the HPA axis (hypothalamus-pituitary-adrenal). High arousal increases glucose availability in the bloodstream and the rate at which we burn energy. We call this the 'stress response' as opposed to the 'relaxation response'.

We can't control the stress response directly. We can't consciously lower blood pressure and heart rate, but we can do it through a proxy. If we consciously relax the breath, this will have an immediate ripple effect on the other components of the stress response as well. A sigh or yawn, for example, doesn't only relaxes the breath. At exactly the same time, it slightly reduces blood pressure and heart rate. They are that closely connected.

The Breath Meditation is traditionally regarded as a tranquility practice (*samadhi*). It tends to have a soothing, even sedating effect, and many people use it to fall asleep. The Bodyscan on the other hand makes the mind slightly more alert and discriminating. You know where you're at, aches and pains and all, when you scan your body. It is more of a mindfulness practice (*sati*).

The Breath Meditation is popular for many reasons. The breath is comfortable and soothing to focus on. The gentle ebb and flow literally massages the internal organs. The breath gives us good immediate feedback on how wired-up or relaxed we are. Tight grabby breaths indicate tension. Long, releasing breaths show we're relaxed. We also get our first conscious taste of physical stillness and mental silence in the gap between the out-breath and the in-breath.

The breath is a good anchor for other practices. It is transparent and accommodating. While focusing on the breath, we can easily scan the body or say a mantra or monitor thoughts or listen to sounds or do a visualisation as well. Despite its apparent simplicity, the Breath Meditation is a practice that matures over the years and can last a lifetime. It is a straightforward entry-point into the body schema. If you just did this one practice well and allowed it to evolve naturally, you wouldn't need anything else.

How to do the Breath Meditation

First, you choose your posture. Lying down or using a reclining chair is quite okay if you want to relax quickly and don't mind falling asleep. Sitting in a padded upright chair or on the floor will give you better focus and mental control. It is good to start with two or three energetic sighs and a rapid scan of the body. It is remarkable how much tension you can shed almost immediately if you do this.

It is best to focus on the breath in a precise location in the body. Some people just 'think' the breath, or ride up and down on it, but that's too vague. It is better to settle the mind down in one particular place so it doesn't drift. It doesn't matter where. It could be at the nostrils, the throat, the chest, the diaphragm or belly. It is best to focus on the place where the breath is most vivid for you.

Good focus is not static. It involves a sense of gentle, moment-by-moment enquiry. This quality of quiet, steady investigation is called *dhamma-vicaya* in the *Sutta*. Your brain and mind are intuitively seeking what feels most pleasant and satisfying. With a little practice, you will gradually notice the breath in much more detail than you normally would.

In the *Sutta*, the Buddha described the process this way: "When the monk is breathing in, he knows, 'I am breathing in.' When the monk is breathing out, he knows, 'I am breathing out.'" You should also be able to recognise when your breaths are short or long, smooth or irregular, comfortable or awkward. These are indicators that you really are focused and are not just fooling yourself.

Healthy breathing is naturally irregular and variable. It will intuitively find its own rhythm appropriate to circumstances and the person. This is why Buddhist practices usually don't try to control or shape the breath. This makes them quite different from many of the pranayama exercises in yoga.

Another sign of good focus is that time seems to slow down. You step out of 21st Century cybertime into the natural rhythms of body time (which hasn't changed in millennia). You should also be able to catch the split-second when the breath seems to stop, and the split-second it starts.

People commonly use props to stay on the track of the breath. These aren't essential but they are excellent training wheels. You could try to silently count three or four breaths in a row repeatedly, saying the count at the end of the out-breath: 'one . . . two . . . three . . . four.'

If you still get distracted, you could double-count, saying the number on both the in-breath and the out-breath: 'one. . . one . . . two . . . two . . .etc.' If you don't like counting, you could just say 'in . . . out . . .' repeatedly as you breathe. These were the Buddha's instructions.

Alternatively, you could silently say an affirmation such as 'Let go' or 'Slow down' or 'Be still.' You would say one word on the in-breath and one on the out-breath. If you used a single word such as 'Relax', you would say it on the out-breath. Saying affirmations tends to have a more soothing and hypnotic effect than counting.

Name the Distraction

Counting or saying affirmations may seem absurdly simple, but you shouldn't underestimate the power of your habitual thoughts to derail you. While focusing on the breath you still have to monitor the peripheral mental activity, and respond to it as necessary. Most thoughts are light and trivial. They will just cruise by and disappear, and you get better at shrugging them off. However when you get seriously distracted, you need another strategy.

'Naming the Distraction' is like a micro-mindfulness technique inserted into your session. It goes like this: When you get distracted, don't get annoyed with yourself. It happens to everyone. I still get distracted after nearly half a century of meditation. Instead, you stop and deliberately ask: 'What is this?'

You 'hold the distraction in mind'. You become 'mindful' of that thought. You then name the content: 'Food, TV, Josephine, sex, work' or whatever. To name a thought means you have to step outside the ongoing conversation and see it under its general category instead. To become fully conscious in this way of what is distracting you gives you more power over it.

To name or label something objectifies it somewhat, and gives you the chance to evaluate it. Shall I stay with this thought or not? Most emerging thoughts can be abandoned on the spot once you are fully mindful of them. Others can be postponed or 'shelved' or 'boxed up' or put in the distance.

Within Buddhism this technique is variously called Naming or Labelling or Categorising or Noting. As taught by the Burmese reformer monk Mahasi Sayadaw, it is a fundamental technique in Vipassana

practice and Psychological Mindfulness. I will describe the further developments of this technique in Chapter 6.

No one can meditate well unless they have good, conscious strategies for managing distractions. Any distraction will always have more emotional charge and allure ('pay attention to me!') than focusing on the breath, which can seem quite pedestrian in comparison. Big distractions are most unlikely to fade away if you just try to ignore them.

Be mindful of the results

While focusing on the breath, you should feel your body relaxing at the same time. This is one reason that you are meditating after all. Your body may feel heavy or still or numb or even light. You may notice tingling or warmth or pulsing on the skin. You feel muscles continuing to relax. You may well feel your tiredness and aches and pains coming to the surface. Enjoy these sensations. They all confirm that you're on the right track.

Don't forget to monitor your mind and mood as well. The Buddha called this being mindful of your 'State of Mind' (See Chapter 17). Are you focused or is your mind drifting? Are you falling asleep and losing control, or are you fully tuned into what is happening? Do you feel at home in your body and accepting of your mood, or are you unconsciously resisting it?

When you finish the meditation, ask yourself: 'Was that worth doing or not? Is my body relaxed? Is my mind calmer and more in control?' If you're not sure, or if the results were mediocre, you probably won't have the motivation to continue. A meditation has to be sufficiently rewarding to justify the time you spend doing it.

For how long should I meditate?

For how long should you do this? There is a good reason why a Standard Meditation Practice is 15 minutes or longer. It usually takes 2-3 minutes for you to break the habit of compulsive thought and actually start to feel the body schema. At some time within 5-10 minutes, the body is likely to touch the point of sleep. You are definitely relaxing and you know it!

However, the mind takes longer to truly settle. When the body relaxes, the mind typically gets sleepy. Every meditator knows the feeling of bobbing in and out of sleep. These few minutes of recovery sleepiness are

often necessary, especially after a long day, but grogginess is hardly an ultimate goal.

Fairly soon a more satisfying state of mind should emerge. You feel alert, calm and controlled. This tends to happen 15-20 minutes into a meditation. This is the ideal state: body relaxed, mind relatively calm and controlled. It still takes some effort to maintain, but it can be enormously rewarding. Once you've got it, how long should you continue? You will normally stop, as you should, when it intuitively feels right to do so, but it is good to have an approximate target.

I was trained to do meditations that were one hour, two hours and sometimes three hours long. I now see that as having a monastic rationale: the longer you withdraw from the temptations of the world, the safer you are.

I now think that the law of diminishing returns sets in after 20-25 minutes for most people. A 1-hour meditation is only slightly more profitable than a 25 minute session. Long meditations can be truly beautiful, but they are also far more prone to sleepiness and mental wandering. People who only do long meditations may be unconsciously training themselves into states of relaxed fogginess rather than mental clarity. Long meditations may actually increase, rather than decrease, the time people spend in pointless, low-level rumination. If you have the time, short frequent sessions usually work better than single long ones. There are good reasons why the length of a Standard Meditation Practice is usually 15-25 minutes.