Why Mindfulness Meditation Begins with the Breath

We can learn a lot from the natural rhythm, pace, and un-fussiness of how the breath continues its work, without making a big deal out of it.

By Ed Halliwell

There are a lot of useful mindfulness practices offered out there—like savoring a snack or the walk home—but cultivating the foundational attention practice of resting your mind on an anchor may be the most important. This involves learning a basic mindfulness meditation, such as following the breath, and practicing it on a regular, preferably daily, schedule.

“My breath is boring—just the same thing over and over again! Surely there must be something more interesting to watch?” This kind of comment comes up quite often when people start mindfulness training.

It’s good to be curious about why we practice mindfulness of breathing, but just because we experience some discomfort during the practice doesn’t mean it’s not helpful. In fact, perhaps it’s helpful partly because the breath shows us our discomfort and the patterns of relationship that perpetuate it. Rather than immediately looking for a more exciting mindfulness practice, let’s consider the possible benefits of staying with the breath. Here are a few to ponder.

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1. The breath doesn’t try to get anywhere

In and out. In and out. The breath isn’t focused on improving style, becoming more efficient, or rushing to reach the end of some daily respiration quota in order to take a break. As long as we let it, the breath mostly just does what it does. Of course, there is
something very vital happening when we breathe—without it we die—but trying to speed it up, force it, grasp it, push it away or control it tends to get in the way. As in breathing, so in life—we can learn a lot from the natural rhythm, pace, and un-fussiness of the way breath continues its work, without making a big deal out of it.

2. The breath teaches us steadfastness

Much of the time our minds wander, either drawn to focus, ruminate, or push away unpleasant experiences, or chasing after stuff we like. But if we don’t practice being still, we are prone to get blown about by every wind, buffeted by the ups and downs of life. By training to pay attention precisely and gently to the breath, coming back again and again, we cultivate a resilience that allows us to be present when difficulty and temptation arises. Distractions still come, but we don’t get so lost in them. This is a master key to well-being, and the breath offers a simple, regular, and available tool to practice with and learn from.

3. The breath happens in the body

For those of us accustomed to experiencing everything from our heads, the breath invites us to a lower center of gravity. We let go of thinking for a time and come down to the belly. We feel the texture of the breath, its rising and falling, and the physical sensations of movement that accompany it. This helps synchronize body and mind, bringing us more into a mode of present-moment sensing. When we feel the breath, we feel the essence of being alive. This often feels good, even if we’re having a hard time. As Jon Kabat-Zinn says: “If you’re breathing, there’s more right with you than wrong.”

4. The breath isn’t really that boring

Are you paying attention to the breath, or just your idea of how it is, should or shouldn’t be? Is this breath really the same as the last one, or subtly different, in duration, texture, and intensity? When you open to the actual sensations of breathing, is it really so tedious? Isn’t it rather remarkable and wonderful that we are kept alive in each moment through this mysterious process of inhalation and exhalation, of oxygenation and blood pumping, of the air reaching all the cells of the body? Isn’t it amazing that there’s air to breathe, a body to take it in, and a mind to watch it? Each moment we’re interested in the process of breathing, we are training ourselves in curiosity. Maybe other so-called boring aspects of life contain jewels that we miss and dismiss too hastily?
5. You don’t breathe. The breath breathes

You are not in charge of your breathing, or at least, not so much. Yes, you could hold your breath (for a while) and you could choose to breathe deliberately fast and shallow for a time, but fairly soon any attempt to force the breath will produce counter-measures from within. At the same time, with practice, it’s possible to learn to align with the breath, gently moving with it, while allowing space for it to come into its own natural depth, pace, and flow. Things seem to go best when we cooperate with the breath, rather than resisting or clinging to it. This is good training for the rest of life, over which we also have only partial control.

6. The breath invites us to rest and recuperate

When early humans faced a predator attack, the breath would quicken and the muscles would tense in preparation for fight or flight. If they survived the attack, there would follow a period of rest and recuperation, as the breath slowed down and the body returned to balance. The same reactions occur in us today, except many threats we face are chronic and ongoing (stressful jobs, noisy neighbors, long-term illness, etc) and our bodies may not get much chance to come back to balance. The stillness and space of mindfulness of breathing allows us to move into recovery mode, as we take some time out from the frenetic pace of activity or worry that many of us live with. Regular attention to the breath could save us from overheating and breakdown.