

# Awareness of the Breath

The breath is always with us and is the thread which connects every moment of our lives. We have been breathing since we were born, and will continue to breathe until we die. The breath is an exchange of energy and nourishment between the environment “outside” of us and the “internal” environment of our own body. Every living being has its own way of breathing and manifesting this exchange. It is as if the whole planet is breathing.

Each breath has its own flow and rhythm. It flows through us like a river, or like a wave undulating up and down, in and out. What we often think of as the breath, is actually the movement of the body as it accommodates to the process of breathing – the rhythm of the breathing body.

And as we pay attention, we may notice the different distinct stages of the breath: the in-breath, the short pause at the top of the in-breath, the out-breath, and the pause at the ending of the out-breath. We may notice the point at which the breath enters the body – the subtle brushing sensations at the tip of the nostrils or somewhere inside the nasal cavity. We may notice the deep rising and the falling of the abdomen with our diaphragmatic breathing and the shallow movements of the chest and rib-cage as we breathe. Perhaps we can feel the movements of the breath in the back of our bodies, and throughout each part of our bodies, knowing that the breath has the capacity to nourish every organ and every cell.

We will start to notice how the breath changes with our moods. There are times when it feels, rapid, shallow, tight or restricted. There are times when it feels slow, deep and full. There are times when we hold the breath and it feels as if it momentarily stops. There are times when we try to control or interfere with the breath. There are times when we can just allow it to happen by itself, when we can trust the wisdom of the body. Sometimes, even bringing awareness to the breath may make us feel anxious, particularly if we have had any experience of breathing problems or symptoms of panic.

The breath can be a barometer as to how we are in any given moment. It can be used as a tool for tuning in to our experience, our body and our emotions. It can be used as an anchor, to ground us back into the present moment. It can be a support for our mindfulness meditation practice – it is always there – like a friend we return to again and again, whenever we are getting lost in our experience. All we need to do is to come back to our awareness of the breath: the sensations of the breath, the quality of the breath, the taste, the sound, the wonder of the breath.

Mindfulness of breathing can be practiced in a number of ways and situations, from an informal checking in with the breath at occasional moments throughout the day to the formal practice of meditation on the breath. Breathing with awareness or conscious breathing is a life saver. With practice we will find that we can apply it to a number of difficult situations in our lives: in managing anxiety and anger, in facing illness or pain, in dealing with the very real challenges of our everyday lives.

Each time we bring awareness to our breathing, whatever we are doing, we will immediately be more present with our experience.

*Adapted from the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction program.*