



## Mindfulness of Breathing – The anchor in the present moment

### The Island of Grounding Mindfulness

#### Gathering awareness: The first material for our raft

*“Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.” - Thich Nhat Hanh*

Following our arrival on the Island of Grounding Mindfulness, our first destination on our RAFT journey, we looked at ‘Mindfulness of the body’ as the primary field for recognising the nature of our existence. We now delve into the first, most fundamental, and universally accessible practice within this domain: mindfulness of breathing. This practice forms a core aspect of mindfulness training, helping us explore the nature of our direct experience, including its impermanence, and begin to sit with the discomfort that is part of life, without immediately needing to escape it. It forms a cornerstone of mindfulness training and is an essential skill, a sound anchor, we collect as we continue constructing our RAFT to Freedom.

#### Tuning into the ever-present breath

The breath is unique. It's an automatic bodily function, yet we can also control it consciously. It's constantly changing, yet always present from birth until death. It sits at the threshold between the voluntary and involuntary, the conscious and unconscious. Because it's always with us, the breath serves as a perfect anchor, a reliable home base to return to whenever our minds get lost in the past, carried away by future worries, or caught in the turbulent currents of craving or difficult emotions.

*“You shouldn’t chase after the past or place expectations on the future. What is past is left behind. The future is as yet unreached. Whatever quality is present you clearly see right there, right there.” said Gotama ~The Buddha.*

The basic instruction, as outlined by Gotama in his famous talk about the **four anchors of mindfulness**, is deceptively simple:

*"Here a practitioner, gone to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut, sits down; having folded his legs crosswise, set his body upright, and established mindfulness in front of him, ever mindful he breathes in, ever mindful he breathes out."*

We simply bring our attention to the natural flow of the breath, feeling the physical sensations as it enters and leaves the body. We don't try to control it or change it (unless we are specifically doing a different type of breath exercise), but rather we observe its natural rhythm. As Gotama's instructions continue:

*"Breathing in a long breath, the meditator understands: 'I am breathing in a long breath'; or breathing out a long breath, they understand: 'I am breathing out a long breath.' Breathing in short breath, they understand: 'I am breathing in a short breath'; or breathing out a short breath, they understand: 'I am breathing out a short breath.'"*

We notice the quality of the breath – is it long or short, deep or shallow, fast or slow? We might focus on the sensations at the tip of our nostrils where the air enters and leaves, or the rising and falling sensation of our tummies or chest. The key is gentle, sustained attention on the *physical feeling* of breathing, moment by moment.

### **Why start here?**

Mindfulness of breathing is a foundational practice for several key reasons, each providing vital material for our raft:

★ **Anchoring:** The breath provides an immediate, tangible focal point to anchor the mind in the present, counteracting distraction, mind-wandering, and importantly, helping us find stability when caught in the turbulent currents of craving or the urge to relapse. It's like a steady rope we can hold onto when the waters get rough.

★ **Calming:** Paying gentle attention to the breath tends to soothe the

nervous system, reducing stress and anxiety, and calming the inner agitation that often fuels the desire to indulge in our compulsive behaviours. This creates a calmer inner environment, essential for recovery and for beginning to recognise and sit with life's inherent difficulties – Gotama's first realisation – rather than habitually reacting. This calm focus is an important link in the chain of the anchor of grounding mindfulness.

- ★ **Developing concentration:** Regularly returning our attention to the breath when the mind wanders helps develop an unscattered mind. We will explore this in more detail in a later stage of our journey.
- ★ **Observing change:** Each breath is different; the flow is constantly changing. Observing this directly provides an experiential insight into impermanence, a key aspect of Gotama's first realisation. This understanding can be particularly helpful in addiction recovery, as it allows us to see that cravings and difficult emotions are also impermanent – they arise, and they will pass.
- ★ **Self-awareness:** By observing the breath, we naturally become more aware of our mental state. Is our breath agitated when we are anxious? Does it become shallow when we are tense? Does it deepen when we relax? This links our inner state to our physical experience, helping us to **recognise** our patterns. It also allows us to observe thoughts and emotions arising and passing without immediately identifying with them or believing they are personal to us. This growing awareness is crucial for navigating the path to recovery.

Mindfulness of breathing, grounded in our commitment to the 'Five gifts' – harmlessness – and held with 'self-compassion', is crucial. This self-compassion is an inward kindness in action, our appropriate response to our own pain, difficulties, and disappointments. When we notice our mind has wandered – as it inevitably will – or when difficult feelings arise during mindfulness of breathing, responding with gentle understanding rather than harsh judgment is an act of self-compassion. This is especially important in recovery, where self-blame can be a significant obstacle. Practising in this way is foundational for us to gather the awareness we need to recognise and

understand the terrain of our lives and build a reliable raft.

### **Relevance to recovery from harmful cravings and compulsive behaviours**

Mindfulness of breathing is a particularly powerful tool for navigating the challenges of recovery from harmful cravings and compulsive behaviours:

- ★ **Countering intoxication:** By grounding our awareness in the simple reality of our breath, mindfulness of breathing helps us to dispel the mental foggy and delusion, a characteristic of all forms of intoxication. Mindfulness of breathing helps us to foster mental clarity.
- ★ **Increased awareness:** Mindfulness of breathing helps us to recognise subtle cravings, triggers, physical sensations, and emotional states that often precede us falling overboard, allowing for earlier intervention.
- ★ **Emotional regulation:** It also creates a crucial *gap* between feeling an urge or difficult emotion and reacting impulsively, allowing time for us to choose a more helpful response.
- ★ **Stress reduction:** This practice directly calms our nervous system, reducing the background stress and anxiety that often fuels our desire to distract ourselves by using substances, or engage in compulsive behaviours.
- ★ **Improved focus:** Mindfulness of breathing enhances the concentration we need to engage effectively with therapy, support groups, and to learn new coping strategies.
- ★ **Breaking the ‘autopilot’:** This practice interrupts the habitual, often unconscious, link between our triggers and destructive compulsive behaviours by bringing conscious awareness to the present moment.
- ★ **Cultivating self-compassion:** By practising non-judgemental observation of the breath, including moments of distraction or difficulty, we foster a kinder attitude towards ourselves, reducing our shame and self-blame.
- ★ **Accessible coping skill:** The practice offers us a readily available tool to use during moments of intense craving, stress, or overwhelm, offering

immediate support when navigating tricky waters.

- ★ **Building routine:** Incorporating a regular breath practice – even just five minutes at a time – helps us to establish structure and healthy habits that support our overall well-being and wellness.

### **Self-reflections on breath meditation.**

Find a quiet moment to sit and gently bring awareness to your breath for just a minute or two, then reflect:

- ★ What physical sensations of breathing did I notice most clearly (for example, at nostrils, chest, tummy)?
- ★ Did my mind wander? If so, what was my reaction to noticing the wandering?
- ★ Did I find myself trying to control my breath, or was I able to observe its natural rhythm?
- ★ How did my body feel before, during, and after this brief period of breath awareness?
- ★ Did focusing on my breathing feel pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral?

### **Journaling prompts**

Use your journal to explore your experience with breath awareness practice:

- ★ **Starting small:** Commit to practising 3-5 minutes of mindful breathing once or twice a day for the next few days. Journal briefly after each session about what you noticed – ease, difficulty, quality of attention, thoughts/feelings that arose.
- ★ **Breath throughout the day:** Set an intention to consciously check in with your breath a few times during your daily activities (for example, while waiting, walking, working). What do you notice about your breath, and your state of mind, in these different situations?
- ★ **Mind wandering:** During your practice, pay attention to *where* your mind

tends to go when it wanders. Are there common themes? For example, are you planning, worrying, remembering, or fantasising? Practise gently acknowledging your thoughts and gently guide your attention back to your breathing. Write about this process of noticing and returning.

- ★ **Breath and emotion:** Try to notice the connection between your breath and your emotional state. When you feel stressed or anxious, what happens to your breath? When you feel calm, how does it change? Write about your observations.

### **Supporting material: scientific and philosophical perspectives on breath awareness**

For those interested in the science and philosophy behind this practice, here is a brief overview:

The benefits of mindfulness of breathing are increasingly validated by modern science and resonate with philosophical principles:

- ★ **Neuroscience:** Conscious attention to breathing directly influences the *autonomic nervous system*. Slow, mindful breathing tends to activate the parasympathetic nervous system (the ‘rest and digest’ system) via the vagus nerve, counteracting the stress response (sympathetic ‘fight or flight or freeze’). This lowers heart rate, blood pressure, and cortisol levels. Brain imaging shows that mindfulness practice strengthens activity in the *prefrontal cortex* (attention control, emotional regulation) and can reduce activity in the *amygdala* (threat detection) and the *Default Mode Network* (associated with mind-wandering and rumination).
- ★ **Psychology:** Mindfulness of breathing is a core component of evidence-based therapies like MBSR, MBCT, MBRP, ACT, and DBT. It's proven effective in reducing stress, anxiety, and symptoms of depression. By creating a pause between stimulus and response, it enhances *emotional regulation* skills, crucial for managing cravings and difficult emotions without resorting to addictive behaviours. It increases *interoceptive awareness*, helping individuals reconnect with their bodies and understand their emotional cues. As Jon Kabat-Zinn emphasises in

his groundbreaking book, 'Full Catastrophe Living', it helps us utilise the wisdom of our body and minds, to face stress and pain. Furthermore, observing the breath without judgement, cultivates *self-compassion*, counteracting the harsh self-criticism often present in addiction.

★ **Philosophy:** The focus on the present moment aligns with philosophies valuing direct experience over conceptualisation (like phenomenology). The practice cultivates *attentional discipline*, a virtue emphasised by Stoics and other schools focused on self-mastery. Simply observing the breath is an exercise in *being* rather than constantly *doing*, counteracting the restless striving that often underlies dissatisfaction. It connects us to the fundamental rhythm of life itself.

### **Remember to remember**

'Mindfulness of Breathing' is far more than a simple relaxation technique; it is a foundational practice for cultivating the calm, clarity, and self-awareness essential for recovery. It is one of the primary skills we cultivate to stabilise our raft, providing a reliable anchor in the often-turbulent waters of early recovery and beyond. By consistently returning our attention to the simple, tangible reality of the breath, we ground ourselves in the present moment, develop crucial skills in emotional regulation and focus, and begin to directly recognise the nature of our own minds and bodies.

Practise patiently, practise kindly. There is no perfect way to breathe or to be mindful of it. Simply showing up and gently bringing your attention back, again and again, is the practice itself.

As we become more grounded through breath awareness, we are better prepared to explore other aspects of body mindfulness, starting with our physical postures in the next chapter.

### **Sutta References**

★ **Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (MN 10 / DN 22 - The Foundations of Mindfulness):**  
Provides the foundational instructions for Ānāpānasati within the context of the Four Foundations.

- **Summary:** As quoted above, it instructs the practitioner to go to a quiet place, sit mindfully, and observe the long and short in-breaths and out-breaths, establishing mindfulness right at the forefront.
- This talk highlights that an "uninstructed run-of-the-mill person" fails to see what is worthy of consideration in the body (its true nature), implying that mindfulness practices like Ānāpānasati allow us to see this reality clearly, leading towards

★ **Ānāpānasati Sutta (MN 118 - Mindfulness of Breathing):** Offers the most detailed canonical instructions on using breath awareness to develop calm, insight, and liberation.

- **Summary:** This sutta presents sixteen steps for contemplating the breath, progressing from basic awareness of long/short breaths to experiencing the whole body with the breath, calming bodily formations, experiencing rapture and pleasure, discerning mental states, and ultimately leading to insight into impermanence, fading away, cessation, and relinquishment, thereby fulfilling the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and the Seven Factors of Enlightenment.

★ [Girimananda Sutta \(AN 10.60 - To Girimananda\)](#): Lists mindfulness of breathing among key perceptions for healing and liberation.

- **Summary:** The Buddha teaches ten perceptions to the ailing monk Girimananda to help overcome his illness and suffering. Mindfulness of breathing (ānāpānasati) is listed among these beneficial perceptions, alongside perceptions of impermanence, not-self, foulness (of the body), danger (in sensual pleasures), dispassion, cessation, disenchantment with all worlds, and impermanence in all conditioned things.



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