



09 - Mindfulness of Breathing

This document is an extract from the full chapter, which is available for download in the table via this link: <https://raft2freedom.org/raft-to-freedom-downloads/>

This concentration by mindfulness of breathing, when developed and cultivated, is peaceful and sublime, an ambrosial pleasant dwelling, and it disperses and quells right on the spot evil unwholesome states whenever they arise.

- Vesālī Sutta (SN 54.9), translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi

Mindfulness of breathing is our first and most fundamental practice within grounded mindfulness - the primary field, established in the previous chapter, for recognising the nature of our existence. The breath sits at the threshold between the voluntary and involuntary, always present, making it a reliable anchor whenever the mind is carried into the past, the future, or the turbulent currents of reactivity.

Returning attention to the breath, again and again, is itself the practice: it steadies the mind, calms the nervous system, and gives us direct, felt evidence that experience - including craving and difficult emotion - is impermanent. Held together with self-compassion, this gentle returning becomes an act of kindness towards ourselves rather than a test to pass.

This foundational skill - Recognise's first task, gathering the awareness we need to see our lives clearly - creates the pause between an urge and a reaction in which a different, more helpful response becomes possible.

Self-reflections

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

1. What physical sensations of breathing did I notice most clearly - at the nostrils, chest or tummy? ([view card](#))
2. Did my mind wander? If so, what was my reaction to noticing the wandering? ([view card](#))
3. Did I find myself trying to control my breath, or was I able to observe its natural rhythm? ([view card](#))

4. How did my body feel before, during and after this brief period of breath awareness? ([view card](#))
5. Did focusing on my breathing feel pleasant, unpleasant, or neither? ([view card](#))
6. When I noticed a craving, urge or difficult emotion arise just now, could I find the gap between feeling it and reacting to it? ([view card](#))
7. What did it feel like to simply return to the breath, again and again, rather than needing to get it “right”? ([view card](#))

Journaling prompts

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

1. **Starting small:** commit to practising three to five 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 or feelings that arose.
2. **Breath throughout the day:** set an intention to consciously check in with your breath a few times during your daily activities - while waiting, walking, working. What do you notice about your breath, and your state of mind, in these different situations?
3. **Mind wandering:** during your practice, pay attention to where your mind tends to go when it wanders. Are there common themes - planning, worrying, remembering, fantasising? Practise gently acknowledging your thoughts and guiding your attention back to your breathing. Write about this process of noticing and returning.
4. **Breath and emotion:** 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.
5. **The steady rope:** write about a recent moment when the breath acted as “a steady rope” you could hold onto when things felt rough. What made it possible to reach for it in that moment?
6. **Breath as evidence of impermanence:** notice how each breath is slightly different from the last. What does it feel like to let this ordinary observation stand in for the bigger truth that reactivity and difficult feelings are impermanent too?
7. **A gentler autopilot:** think of one habitual, semi-automatic response you'd like to interrupt. How might returning to the breath, even briefly, create a gap before you act next time?

For a printable reminder to carry this stage's practice into daily life, see the Self-Compassion card: <https://raft2freedom.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/08/appropriate-response-self-compassion.png>

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 this whole journey depends on. It is one of the primary skills we cultivate to stabilise our raft, providing a reliable anchor in often-turbulent waters. By consistently returning our attention to the simple, tangible reality of the breath, we ground ourselves in the present moment and develop crucial skills in emotional regulation and focus.

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.

Feelings come and go like clouds in a windy sky. Conscious breathing is my anchor.

- Thich Nhat Hanh, Stepping into Freedom: An Introduction to Buddhist Monastic Training

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