

Mindfulness of Breathing

The Heart of the Buddha's Teachings

Thich Nhat Hanh

The fourth element of our body is air. The best way to experience the air element is the practice of mindful breathing. "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." After saying these sentences, we can abbreviate them by saying "In" as we breath in, and "Out" as we breath out. We don't try to control our breathing. Whether our in-breath is long or short, deep or shallow, we just breathe naturally and shine the light of mindfulness on it. When we do this, we notice that, in fact, our breathing does become slower and deeper naturally. "Breathing in, my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, my out-breath has become slow." Now we can practice, "Deep/slow." We don't have to make an effort. It just becomes deeper and slower by itself, and we recognize that.

Later on, you will notice that you have become calmer and more at ease. "Breathing in, I feel calm. Breathing out, I feel at ease. I am not struggling anymore. Calm/ease." And then, "Breathing in, I smile. Breathing out, I release all my worries and anxieties. Smile/release." We are able to smile to ourselves and release all our worries. There are more than three hundred muscles in our face, and when we know how to breath in and smile, these muscles can relax. This is "mouth yoga." We smile and we are able to release all of our feelings and emotions. The last practice is, "Breathing in, I dwell deeply in the present moment. Breathing out, I know this is a wonderful moment. Present moment/wonderful moment." Nothing is more precious than being in the present moment, fully alive and fully aware.

In, out

Deep, slow

Calm, ease

Smile, release

Present moment, wonderful moment

If you use this poem during sitting or walking meditation, it can be very nourishing and healing. Practice each line for as long as you wish.

Another practice to help us be aware of our breathing is counting. As you breathe in, count "one," and as you breathe out, count "one" again. Then "Two/two," "Three/three," until you arrive at ten. After that, go back in the other direction: "Ten/ten," "Nine/nine," and so on, until you arrive back at one. If you don't get lost, you know that you have good concentration. If you do get lost, go back to "one," and begin again. Relax. It's only a game. When you succeed in counting, you can drop the numbers if you like and just say "in" and "out." Conscious breathing is a joy. When I discovered the Discourse on the Full Awareness of Breathing, I felt I was the happiest person on Earth. These exercises have been transmitted to us by a community that has been practicing them for 2,600 years.⁵

⁵ See Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe! You Are Alive*.