

# The Practice of Breath Meditation

Meditation on the breath is found in the spiritual practices of many religions (see *The Breath of Life: The Practice of Breath Meditation According to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and Christian Traditions*), and particularly in Buddhism, where it is known as *Anapanasati*, awareness of the inhaling and exhaling breaths, and is the meditation technique practiced and taught by the Buddha.

Meditation is the process of re-centering our awareness in the principle of pure consciousness which is our essential being. We have lost awareness of our true Self through awareness of external objects, and become habituated—even addicted—to objective consciousness. Rather than disperse our consciousness through objects that draw us outward, away from the center of our being, we can take an object that will have the opposite effect, present it to the mind, and reverse our consciousness. That object is the breath, which is the meeting place of body, mind, and spirit.

The breath and the *body* are interconnected, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the body is calm, and agitated or labored when the body is agitated or labored. The heavy exhalation made when feeling exhausted and the enthusiastic inhalation made when feeling energized or exhilarated establish the same fact.

The breath and the *emotions* are interconnected, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the emotions are calm, and agitated and labored when the emotions are agitated or out of control. Our drawing of a quick breath, when we are surprised, shocked, or fearful, and the forceful exhalation done when angry or annoyed demonstrate this.

The breath and the *mind* are interconnected, as is seen from the fact that the breath is calm when the mind is calm, and agitated, irregular, and labored when the mind is agitated or disturbed in any way. Our holding of the breath when attempting intense concentration also shows this.

Breath, which exists on all planes of manifestation, is the connecting link between matter and energy on the one hand and consciousness and mind on the other. By sitting with closed eyes and letting the mind

become easefully absorbed in observing and experiencing the movements of the breath we enter into the consciousness from which it arises—the eternal Witness Consciousness.

We start with awareness of the ordinary physical breath, but that awareness, when cultivated correctly, leads us into higher awareness which enables us to perceive the subtle movement behind the breath. Ultimately, we come into contact with the Breather of the breath, our own spirit-Self.

In many spiritual traditions the same word is used for both breath and spirit, underscoring the esoteric principle that in essence they are the same, though we naturally think of spirit as being the cause of breath(ing). The word used for both breath and spirit is: In Judaism: *Ruach*. In Eastern Christianity (and ancient Greek religion): *Pneuma*. In Western Christianity (and ancient Roman religion): *Spiritus*, which comes from *spiro*: “I breathe.” In Hinduism and Buddhism: *Atma*, from the root word *at* which means “to breathe,” and *Prana*, which means “breath.” Meditation on the breath is meditation on spirit, on consciousness itself. This is why the contemporary Thai Buddhist Master Ajaan Fuang Jotiko said: “The breath can take you all the way to Nirvana.”

### **The practice of Breath Meditation**

1) Sit upright, comfortable and relaxed, with your hands on your knees or thighs, palms up or palms down or resting, one on the other, in your lap.

2) Turn your eyes slightly downward and close them gently. This removes visual distractions and reduces your brain-wave activity by about seventy-five percent, thus helping to calm the mind.

3) Your mouth should be closed so all breathing is done through the nose. This, too, aids in quieting the mind. Though your mouth is closed, the jaw muscles should be relaxed so the upper and lower teeth are not clenched or touching one another, but parted.

4) Inhale and exhale slowly and deeply three or four times, feeling the inhaling and exhaling breath moving in and out through your nostrils.

5) Now breathe naturally and easefully, keeping your awareness on the tip of your nose, watching and feeling the breath as it flows in and out of your nostrils. (Some people become more aware of the actual

nosetip, even the very end of the nose, and others remain more aware of the nostrils. Whichever happens naturally is the best for you. So whenever this book says “nosetip” it applies equally to the nostrils.) Do not follow the breath in and out of your body, but just be aware of the breath movement sensation at the tip of your nose.

6) Do this for the rest of the meditation, letting your awareness rest gently on the breath at the nosetip and feeling the sensations of the breath moving there. After a while it may feel as though the breath is flowing in and out the tip of your nose more than the actual nostrils, or you may not feel the nose at all, but just the breath moving at the point in front of your face where the nose is located. That is perfectly all right, but the focus of your attention should be only at that point—not somewhere else either outside or inside the body.

7) Let the breath be as it will. If the breath is naturally long, let it be so. If it is short, let it be so. If the inhalations and exhalations are of unequal length, that is just fine. Let the breath be natural and unforced, and just observe and experience it.

In time your breath will become more subtle and refined, and slow down. Sometimes your breath can become so light that it almost seems as though you are not breathing at all. At such times you may perceive that your inhaling and exhaling are more like a magnetic pull or flow in and out instead of actual breath movements. This occurs as the subtle life force (prana) that produces the breath switches back and forth in polarity from positive to negative. It is also normal for your breath awareness to move back and forth from more objective to more subtle and back to more objective.

Sometimes the subtle breath is silent, but at other times you will inwardly “hear” the breath making sounds as it moves in and out. These will not be actually physical sounds, but very subtle mental sounds. They may be like the sounds made by forceful or heavy inhalation and exhalation—except softer—or they may be quite different. Whatever they may be, just be calmly aware of them while staying centered on the nosetip and breath.

The breath is a kind of barometer of the subtle energies of body and mind. Sometimes it is very smooth, light and easeful, and at other times it feels heavy, even constricted, or clogged, sticky, ragged, uneven, and generally uncomfortable and somehow feels “not right.” When this is so, do not try to interfere with it or “make it better.” Rather, just

relax and be calmly aware and let it be as it is. If you do this, the problem in the subtle energy levels which the breath is reflecting will correct itself and the breath will become easy and pleasant.

8) In Breath Meditation we only focus our awareness on the breath at the noisetip/nostrils, and not on any other point of the body such as the “third eye.” However, as you meditate you may become aware of one or more areas of your body at different times. This is all right when it comes and goes spontaneously, but keep centered on your noisetip and your breath.

9) Thoughts, impressions, memories, inner sensations, and suchlike may also arise during meditation. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner. Let them come and go as they will, but keep your attention centered on the tip of the nose and your breath moving there. Be indifferent to any inner or outer phenomena. Breath Meditation produces peace, awareness and quiet joy in your mind as well as soothing radiations of energy in the physical and subtle bodies. Be calmly aware of all these things in a detached and objective manner—they are part of the transforming effect of meditation, and are perfectly all right—but keep your attention centered in your breath. Even though something feels very right or good when it occurs, it should not be forced or hung on to. The sum and substance of it all is this: It is not the experience we are after, but the effect.

10) If you find yourself getting restless, distracted, fuzzy, anxious or tense in any degree, just inhale and exhale slowly and deeply a few times, feeling the inhaling and exhaling breath moving in and out through your nostrils, at the same time feeling that you are releasing and breathing out all tensions. Then resume meditating as before. Relaxation is the key to successful meditation practice.

11) Keep in mind that Breath Meditation basically consists of being aware in a relaxed and easeful manner of your breath as it moves in and out at the tip of your nose. That is all!

At the end of your meditation time, keep on being calmly aware of your breath moving in and out of your noisetip as you go about your various activities. In this way you can maintain the calm and clear state of meditation.

We recommend a complete book on the subject of Breath Meditation that is posted on this website: *The Breath of Life: The Practice of Breath Meditation According to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Jewish and Christian*

*Traditions.*