

# Learn: Mindfulness of Breathing

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\*This practice will strengthen your prefrontal cortex, leading to increased awareness and self-control.

## **Mindfulness of Breathing**

The intention of this practice is to turn your attention to the breath, notice when the mind wanders, and bring your attention back to the breath. This meditation cultivates self-awareness, mindfulness, and the ability to make conscious choices about what you are doing. It also is good practice in not following every impulse or habit. There are a few different ways to focus on the breath; choose the one that feels right to you.

The first involves labeling the breath. As you inhale, say in your own mind inhale, say in your own mind "Inhale." As you exhale, say in your own mind "Exhale." The second approach is to focus your attention on the sensations of your breath. For example, you might notice the flow of the breath in and out of your nostrils. Or you could focus on feeling your belly expand when you breathe in, and release when your breath out. Let yourself notice whatever sensations of breathing are present. The last approach is to count your breathing cycles. Each time you exhale, that counts as one cycle. So with your next exhalation, you would mentally count "one." With the second exhalation, "two." With the third exhalation, "three." Continue counting until you reach 10; then begin again at 1. If your mind wanders and you lose count, simply begin again at one.

When you practice, you can use any of the techniques, but it's good to find one you like and stick with it. Your mind will inevitably wander. That's not a problem; it's part of the process. When you notice your mind wandering, let it point you back to the breath. Each time you notice the mind daydreaming, or planning, or worrying, or whatever the mind does – that is an opportunity to cultivate awareness, and bring your focus back to the present moment experience of breathing in and breathing out. Have an attitude of compassion toward mental distractions. These are simply habits of the mind that contribute to our daily stress. When you find your mind wandering, gently but resolutely guide your focus back to the breath as an act of self-compassion — without self-judgment or preoccupation with the content of the distractions.

## **How to Practice:**

Begin by practicing for 5 min, 1-3x day; build up to 15-20 min at a time, 1-2x day.

Meditate in a comfortable, upright position. You can sit in a chair, or on the floor with a pillow, cushion, or stacked blanket under your hips or. Sit with your back comfortably straight. If you are sitting in a chair, place your feet flat on the floor. If sitting is painful, you can practice in any position that allows you to feel physically supported while also staying alert and awake. Your eyes can be closed or open. If you leave them open, drop your gaze, and let the eyes rest, without wandering or focusing on anything specific.

As you practice, keep the body as still as possible. Make a commitment to holding the posture you have chosen, without fidgeting or moving around. This is an important part of training the mind to make conscious choices. See if you can feel the impulse to move before you mindlessly follow it; when you feel the urge, pause, and see if you can calmly observe the impulse without acting on it. Most of the time, the impulse will recede on its own.

Always end a session by appreciating and acknowledging your own practice. The success of focus meditation is your own willingness to sit, attend to the breath, notice when the mind wanders, and bring it back to the breath. Some days it may be easier to focus than others, but trust that as long as you are coming back, again and again, to the breath, you are cultivating self-awareness, mindfulness, and the ability to make conscious choices.