

### The Art of Meditation 2: Just Breathe!

#### *The Practice*

You have arrived at your appointed time and your special place.

Light the candle.

Sit so that the spine is erect. Sitting on a chair is fine. So is sitting on the floor in one of the yoga positions – lotus, half-lotus or “adept’s” position.

When you are settled and comfortable, count each breath until you arrive at twenty breaths observing the rise and fall of the abdomen with each one.

That’s it!

#### *More about the practice*

##### **1. Sitting**

The most important part of a meditation posture is that the spine be erect. However ... if you have a debilitating illness or physical condition that does not allow this, then you will have to find another posture. You can lie on your side, or on your back – as long as you can keep the spine straight.

The reason for the erect spine is that as meditation begins to take effect, the person experiences energies moving up the spine. If the spine is twisted by the position, then this energy flow may become blocked – causing physical effects. An old meditation aphorism states:

Straight spine = still mind

In the west, people often meditate sitting on a chair. You can hold your hands together in your lap (conserving energy) or you can place them palm upwards on knees, thumb joining forefinger in a circle (giving out energy). Once again it is important to keep the back comfortably erect – holding it up from the base of the spine. Also the feet should be flat on the ground – here is where the chair needs preferably to be straight.

If you have studied yoga, you may be comfortable in one of the yoga meditation cross-legged positions. Again it is the erectness of the spine that is of the essence. The yoga asanas are designed to support the spine much more than sitting on a chair.

The eyes are best open or half-open. If you have to – you may however have them closed!

## The Art of Meditation: 2

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### 2. *Breathing*

Why count breaths? This practice is found in many meditation traditions across different traditions and cultures. The simple answer is that counting breaths stills and focuses the person. There are many variations on the simple exercise. Here are a few suggestions.

1. Place your consciousness by your nostrils. Become very aware of each breath as it comes in, and then goes out.
2. Visualise the breath as a light or a flame as it enters and exits the nostrils.
3. When you can do both of the first two variations, add visualising a number. Watch this number change as each breath is taken.
4. The most important part of the breathing exercise is the total awareness of each breath. If you lose track of a number, start from the previous ten. This way, if you lose track of your breathing between ten and twenty start again at ten. When you are accomplished you can increase the number of breaths to thirty then, forty and so on. Extend your breath counting to anywhere between five and ten minutes. This exercise may be a preliminary “stilling” exercise for all future meditations.
5. (Rev Mario’s variation): Count backwards. This trick has the effect of making it easier to keep track of each and every breath, because the mind does not so easily slide into rote routine.

### *The Insight*

So what is so special about counting the breath? Many languages link the breath and ‘spirit’. In fact the very Latin word “spiritus” means both soul and breath. Our English words “inspire” and “expire” are derived from the same Latin word. If we understand that the human being comprises two elements, a “spiritual” element and a “physical” element, then we may also realise that the breath is the link between spirit and matter. We do not become part of the physical world until we take our first independent breath, and we leave it with our last. Therefore, the concentration and awareness of this link, brings us much closer to Spirit, and to an awareness that we too, are spiritual beings.

Watching the breath is an aid to mindfulness. When we begin the exercise we should strive to focus every ounce of concentration on it. A Buddhist text describes this as “hanging on to the edge of a cliff with your fingernails. If you let your attention wander, you will fall into the abyss” – This is the amount of concentration needed. After you have completed a few breaths (say ten) like this, let your mind relax and become aware of the space around you. Be aware of physical sensation, of thoughts, of sounds. Then do another series of ten breaths.

Eventually the mind starts to become still. The modern mind is neurotically obsessed with thinking, but the natural state of Mind is to be clear and open like a mirror, or a huge, calm, lake reflecting the sky and the mountains. As you proceed with the exercise over a few weeks or months, you will find that the exercise produces a greater tranquillity and sense of peace. When you have arrived at the stage where you are able to rest in the space around you, experience that as you breathe out, the thinking dissolves. And then there is a gap. The experience of this “gap” produces an openness and a relaxed state of mind which will carry back into our daily world.

## Just Breathe!

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There is a story that the Buddha told a musician that he should control his mind by keeping it “not too tight and not too loose”. As the exercise proceeds, we are able to put 25 per cent on our breathing, the rest of our mental activities should be loose – left open.

If you find that the normal “monkey mind” returns and intrudes its restless thoughts upon this process, watch and see what is being revealed. This is not a problem – it is simply that because we have become more open, deeper levels of memory have been able to come to the surface. Just watch and observe without becoming attached to what is being played out. If the agitation continues, return to the original “cliff-hanging” attention technique and start again until the invasion of the interrupting thoughts has dissolved.

We have become accustomed to a mental state that is hyperactive. It contains continual streams of thought, speeding along spreading aggression, worry, anxiety, rigidity and tension. The breathing exercise produces the feeling that one is drinking pure, cool water in a desert and as we progress, we may feel powerfully drawn to this experience.

The “breathing exercise” however is a beginning. It enables us to establish the right conditions so that we are able to enter deeper and deeper meditation states. Some of these follow up exercises will be given later in these articles, but if we only have ten minutes set aside for meditation, then the first five should always be given over to “counting the breath.”

