

Meditation Using Breath Awareness

There is a difference between meditation and a meditative experience. In meditation you actively participate in the process, or activity. In a meditative experience you either relax and space-out or you become mesmerized by whatever it is that you are doing or seeing. Here are a few examples. You're sitting in a boat, fishing pole in hand and you zone out while you're waiting for a fish. Or you're watching television and you stop actually watching but you still see the television. Or someone is talking and even though you know that they're still talking, you really aren't paying attention. In those examples the mind is just running, like when your car engine is running and you get out of the car to do something and forget that you left the engine running. Both the car and your mind are going but they serve no purpose. Similarly when you relax listening to music, even if you sit in a meditation position thinking, "this is meditation", it really only qualifies as meditative because no work is involved. Both meditating, and relaxing into a meditative experience have beneficial qualities but, like the car engine, it can be a beautiful thing just running or it can take you somewhere. It really depends on what you're looking to do or in this case, where you're looking to go. I believe that because the breath itself is experiential, it can be used as a technique by actively participating in its function. It can act as a mantra by following it repeatedly, keeping the mind active. It can be observed as is, unattached observation, or it can simply exist as it is, pure experience and awareness.

Breath Meditation simply requires breath observance. The practice of breathing is called Pranayama. There are many types of Pranayama, from passive to vigorous, with a lot of control and without any control. The less stimulating ones are often used for, and will eventually lead to, meditation. You've probably noticed by now that all activities of experience, of life, require some sort of breathing. The breath is a normally involuntary function (of life) that can become voluntary. To this degree, by observing, or even participating in your breathing, you can be in control of your existence. That control is consciously obtained. Because of the consciousness' involvement, the act of breathing becomes meditation. The breath itself is experiential, and as the experience continues to unfold, you observe. That's meditation (to contemplate). It should also be mentioned that the activity of the breath itself, has a direct relationship with, and is inseparably connected to, the physical body, the nervous system and the mind. Each continuously reacting to the reaction of the other (perceived stress = mental anxiety = physical tension = erratic breathing, or, calm breathing = relaxed body = no anxiety, physical or mental). By relaxing your breath you relax your body, nervous system and your mind. So conscious breathing brings all aspects of yourself into a more relaxed state, and if you continue to stay with it, eventually leads to meditation.

Regardless of which type of meditation technique you're going to practice, it, like any activity, should be given your full attention. If possible, meditate before eating so your body isn't working to digest recently consumed food. If possible you should satisfy your body's need for comfortable ambient temperature so you're not uncomfortable physically. You should sit with your spine straight and your body comfortable (legs, arms etc.). The basic technique is to sit (in a chair, on a bench, a pillow or on the floor) any way that you can comfortably for an extended amount of time with your spine straight. From this position, close your eyes and begin following your breath. You can either observe the breath as it passes through the opening of choice

(nostrils or mouth), or observe the expanding and contracting (or rising and falling) of your abdomen. Nasal breathing is more beneficial than oral breathing for many reasons, but the most important reason within the context of understanding meditation is that it simulates the parasympathetic nervous system, causing a sense of relaxation. By consciously observing your breath you heighten your internal awareness, you begin to develop a relationship with all the systems of your body (because they are all somehow connected to, and are effected by, the rhythm of your breath). As your relationship with your breath unfolds you will begin to experience the sense of peace that permeates your whole being. Through this concentrating on breath awareness your relationship with your breath will change and so too will your relationship with the rest of your body, including your mind. The act of consciously observing your breath will eventually lead to *citta vrtti nirodah* (cessation of thought) where you will only be aware of the breath itself and its effects on the experience at hand.

How will you know if you're doing it right?

You really can't know if and when you're doing it right. It's a process of experience, and it's the experience itself that meditation is all about. The difficulties you encounter as you begin to meditate are not to be avoided. Stay with them, learn, observe and explore; that's all part of the process. The obstacles, the fears, the confusions, the anxiety, the comfort, the peace, the serenity; these things and feelings are all you, and as you face these aspects of yourself you'll be getting to know the real "you" better. Your experiences are you, so don't be judgmental. You should welcome the things that show you the "self". It is these things that you notice that qualify the experience as awareness, and that awareness opens the door into your consciousness. Meditation can't be copied, recorded, duplicated, seen or purchased; it can only be experienced. For that reason, as a beginner to meditation, it is advisable to have some guidance either from a teacher, a book, tape or whatever. As you continue to practice, questions will come up. If you have someone to talk with about your experiences it will make the process a lot easier to understand for you.

Through meditation we begin to understand the meaning of our life's existence, who we really are, what we really are, what's me and what's not me. We develop a sense of understanding, and feel a sense of belonging which aids in the integration of our personality. It may take a long time, and a lot of meditating, but eventually the meditator and the meditation become one and the same. This will be a little startling the first few times, but it is the eventual goal, finding that ultimate union or samadhi. Meditation isn't just about the wellbeing that it brings on a physical and mental level; it's merging with the object of meditation, leading to merging with consciousness itself.

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