

Discourse on Mindfulness of Breathing | *Ānāpānasati Sutta Majjhima Nikāya 118*

(abridged translation from Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe, You Are Alive!: The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*)

“O bhikkhus [monks], the Full Awareness of Breathing, if developed and practiced continuously, will be rewarding and bring great advantages. It will lead to success in practicing the Four Establishments of Mindfulness. If the method of the Four Establishments of Mindfulness is developed and practiced continuously, it will lead to success in the practice of the Seven Factors of Awakening. The Seven Factors of Awakening, if developed and practiced continuously, will give rise to understanding and liberation of the mind.

“What is the way to develop and practice continuously the method of Full Awareness of Breathing so that the practice will be rewarding and offer great benefit?

“It is like this, bhikkhus [monks]: the practitioner goes into the forest or to the foot of a tree, or to any deserted place, sits stably in the lotus position, holding his or her body quite straight, and practices like this:

‘Breathing in, I know I am breathing in.
Breathing out, I know I am breathing out.’

1. ‘Breathing in a long breath, I know I am breathing in a long breath. Breathing out a long breath, I know I am breathing out a long breath.’
2. ‘Breathing in a short breath, I know I am breathing in a short breath. Breathing out a short breath, I know I am breathing out a short breath.’
3. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my whole body. Breathing out, I am aware of my whole body.’
4. ‘Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.’
5. ‘Breathing in, I feel joyful. Breathing out, I feel joyful.’
6. ‘Breathing in, I feel happy. Breathing out, I feel happy.’
7. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my mental formations. Breathing out, I am aware of my mental formations.’
8. ‘Breathing in, I calm my mental formations. Breathing out, I calm my mental formations.’
9. ‘Breathing in, I am aware of my mind. Breathing out, I am aware of my mind.’
10. ‘Breathing in, I make my mind happy. Breathing out, I make my mind happy.’
11. ‘Breathing in, I concentrate my mind. Breathing out, I concentrate my mind.’
12. ‘Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.’
13. ‘Breathing in, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas. Breathing out, I observe the impermanent nature of all dharmas.’
14. ‘Breathing in, I observe the disappearance of desire. Breathing out, I observe the disappearance of desire.’
15. ‘Breathing in, I observe the no-birth, no-death nature of all phenomena. Breathing out, I observe the no-birth, no-death nature of all phenomena.’
16. ‘Breathing in, I observe letting go. Breathing out, I observe letting go.’

“The Full Awareness of Breathing, if developed and practiced continuously according to these instructions, will be rewarding and of great benefit.”

From: Thich Nhat Hanh, *Breathe, You Are Alive!: The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing* (Berkeley, CA: Parallax Press, 2008).

Breathing for Relaxation and Stress Reduction

Breath Meditation is good for:

- Calming and concentrating your mind.
- Taking control of how your mind processes stimuli.
- Assuming more responsibility for the course of your life.
- Learning you can intervene in the stream of causes and conditions that shape us.

When your mind changes, your world changes. *Ānāpānasati* is a great starting point for Buddhist mind-training.

Basic instructions:

1. Choose a quiet place (at least when starting out).
2. In a chair on a cushion, sit comfortably but straight, feet on floor or support.
3. Pick an amount of time and stick to it. (10-15 minutes is a good start.)
4. Focus on your breathing, either at your nostrils or your diaphragm. What does it feel like?
5. After you catch your mind wandering—and it will—just return your attention to your breath.

“To put in a few conscious, deep and calm respirations before starting any continuous work, will likewise be found most beneficial to oneself and to the work as well. To cultivate the habit of doing so before taking important decisions, making responsible utterances, talking to an excited person, etc., will prevent many rash acts and words, and will preserve the balance and efficiency of mind. By simply observing our breath, we can easily and unnoticed by others withdraw into ourselves if we wish to shut ourselves off from disturbing impressions, empty talk in a large company, or from any other annoyance.”

—Nyanaponika Thera, *The Heart of Buddhist Meditation*

Recommendations from: James Nestor, *Breath: the New Science of a Lost Art* (New York: Penguin, 2020).

In general:

- Breathe through your nose, not your mouth, if you can.
- Breathe less (more slowly, fewer breaths).

Box Breathing

Navy SEALs use this technique to stay calm and focused in tense situations. It's simple.

- Inhale to a count of 4; hold 4; exhale 4; hold 4. Repeat.

Longer exhalations will elicit a stronger parasympathetic response. A variation of Box Breathing to more deeply relax the body that's especially effective before sleeping is as follows:

- Inhale to a count of 4; hold 4; exhale 6; hold 2. Repeat.

Try at least six rounds, more if necessary.

4-7-8 Breathing

This technique, made famous by Dr. Andrew Weil, places the body into a state of deep relaxation.

- Close the mouth and inhale quietly through your nose to a mental count of 4.
- Hold for a count of 7.
- Exhale completely through your mouth, with a whoosh, to the count of 8.
- Repeat this cycle for at least four breath cycles, never more than eight breath cycles.