



## BREATH AWARENESS MEDITATION

Breath Awareness Meditation is a simple but effective method to cope with stress and promote wellbeing.

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# **Breath Awareness Meditation**

I would like to teach you a simple form of meditation called breath awareness meditation. In this form of meditation both the breath and meditative aspects come together to reduce stress. I would like to give you some background on each of these components before teaching you the meditative technique.

## **Background information**

Breathing is something that we do so often that we take it for granted. However, if you stop breathing for a few minutes what happens, of course, everybody knows what happens, you die. Breathing is how we get oxygen into our body and oxygen is one of the necessary elements that need be present for us to live. Do you remember when you were back in grammar school, and you were taught about how to prevent a fire. Do you remember being told that a fire has three primary components? Heat, (in our bodies that's usually about 98.6°), fuel (your fuel is what you ate for breakfast this morning) and of course, oxygen, which you inhale from the ocean of gases in which we live. Oxygen is a necessary element in any fire. That includes the fire, the chemical fire, which is your very life.

Think for a moment how oxygen influences fire. The more oxygen present, the hotter the fire burns. For example, if you would blow on fire or fan a fire, what happens? The flames get higher and the fire gets hotter. In years gone by, the blacksmith used a bellows. Using the bellows, he would blow a strong narrow column of air into the fire, which would make the fire hotter. By using such techniques, the fire could be made to be hot enough to melt metals. This is how metallurgy began. Another example of the role of oxygen in a fire is demonstrated by the internal combustion engine. The old engines used a carburetor. On the carburetor there was a small screw that was used to control the flow of air into the carburetor. When the screw was turned to reduced airflow, the engine would idle lower. When the screw was turned in the opposite direction, bringing more air/oxygen into the mixture, the engine would idle higher. Less oxygen the idle is low; more oxygen the idle is high. There is a direct relationship between oxygen and energy. This is also true in your body.

What does this have to do with mental health and stress management? The answer is that your mood state has everything to do with how your body is energized. High-energy states are equated to a high arousal, and tension. Low-energy states are equated to low arousal and rest. In order to function properly an individual must easily move between high and low-energy states multiple times every day. Let me give a few examples: if I'm playing football and I'm running for a touchdown, my breath is rapid and deep. This breathing pattern is necessary to sufficiently energize the body to do the gross amount of work necessary to carry a football, run through a lot of other guys on the field, and get a touchdown.

How about the opposite energy state? Did you ever listen to somebody while they were sleeping? The breath pattern of a sleeping person is slow. This is because the body is at rest. When the body is at rest it is breathing slowly. Less oxygen is necessary for the low-energy state we call rest.

Again how does this information relate to maintaining good mental health? The answer is simple. Stress, tension and anxiety are all characterized by high energy states in the body. Conversely, depression is a mood state usually characterized by a low energy state in your body. Recent research points to cardiovascular exercise as a potent treatment for depression. Why is this? It's simple, exercise forces you to breathe more and raise the energy level of your body.

Anxiety is a normal state of being in all animals. This is part of the fight flight reflex, our basic survival mechanism. Whenever threats are perceived, the body is instantly energized to deal with the perceived emergency. Even if you're doing something that is quite relaxing, the body is instantly energized the moment you perceive a threat. Quite miraculous! Instant energy is generated to deal with the emergency or to run with a football, or whatever you need energy for. However, when a person is anxious, the energy is not being used productively. If it's not being used productively, this high-energy state is a far more destructive influence.

The anxiety is stimulated by some combination of cognitive, social and environmental factors. Sometimes these factors are based in reality, and sometimes they're not. Our imagination has a powerful

influence on our mood states. I'll have a lot more to say about imagination at a later time. Suffice it to say that many people become anxious, meaning their bodies become highly energized, without good reason. This is when anxiety becomes destructive to the mind and body.

And so, because the breath has such a significant influence on our mood, regulation of the breath alone, is a powerful ally in maintaining good mental health. This is especially true in times of stress.

Eastern mystics have known this for thousands of years. They have developed an entire science of the breath. They call it Pranayama. Pranayama means knowledge or study of the breath. Over the centuries various breath exercises have been developed to generate various mental and physical states of being. We've only just started learning about this, in a formal sense, here in the West. However, this knowledge has been part of Western folk law for many years too. Take for example, the following common expressions; "catch your breath" and "a sigh of relief". It would do you well to become more aware of your breath.

Now let's look at meditation, and what meditation is. One way of understanding meditation is to look at the various states of consciousness leading to meditation.

First, there is **awareness**, pure unadulterated awareness. We have the five senses: sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. The senses are used to perceive the external world. The senses also allow us to perceive stimulation inside of our body. There is a constant stream of information flowing through all of our senses, all of the time.

In addition to this, there is a constant stream of information passing through our mind. This information, not only comes in the form of words, it also comes in the form of imagery. Mental imagery can be composed of any combination of sensory data as well as completely abstract ideas such as mathematics or various relationships between things. We can even generate detailed depictions of past and future events, which don't actually exist (in the present).

All this stuff is going on in your brain all the time. If we were unable

to filter out most of the millions of bits of information (the entire world) in our awareness at any given moment, we would not be able to function. The filter by which we screen out unwanted information and focus on the desired information is called **attention**. When we are paying attention, we are focused on only a small percentage of the information (the world) passing through our senses and mind.

The dynamic relationship between each single thing and everything else is described well in gestalt field theory. Basically, Field Theory states that each type of sensation, perception and even thoughts exists in a field of similar sensations, etc. In field theory, any object or thought that we are paying attention to is said to be in the foreground. Everything else in that field (and there is a lot) is in the background. The one thing on which we are focused is part of everything else. However, because we are focused it, it seems to exist as a separate entity. Yet it only exists in relationship with everything else (in that field). Attention brings it into the foreground (a mental state). As soon as attention moves to something else that new object becomes the foreground and the previous object fades into the background. This is so with all things that come into our attention. There is a constant and dynamic interplay between the one thing and everything else.

Most of the various types of problems people have are related to how, and on what, they pay attention to, causing various types of problems and dysfunction in their lives. For example: there are many things going on in any classroom, other than what the teacher is teaching. If the student is focused on something other than the teacher, then the information being taught is not being learned. At least, not learn very well. In this case, the student's attention was drawn to something other than the teacher, and the material being taught. This redirection of attention can be either voluntary or involuntary in nature.

Another problem with attention, we call racing thoughts. When somebody is experiencing racing thoughts, it means that they are experiencing a great many thoughts in rapid succession, one after another without any rest. There is no prolonged focus on one thought. When one is having racing thoughts there is so much background interference that the person can't focus on any one thing (no or little foreground). Therefore he can't get anything done. Another attention problem is fixation or obsession. In this case, the object of attention becomes so constant or solidified that it becomes very difficult for the

individual to think about anything else. This too can create obvious problems in the functioning and mood of an individual. Sometimes a person voluntarily attends to a fixation and sometimes a fixation is involuntary in nature. Either way, it can become a real problem. The person with racing thoughts, is usually confused and cannot see what he needs to do to get accomplished what he needs to accomplish. The person who is fixated is so focused on the one thing that he is freezing the dynamic relationship between the one thing and the all and he can't see all the other possible options available to him in a given situation. Attention serves as a pointer for the capabilities of the mind. As my old Zen master once told me, "if you want to know why you're suffering, just look at what your pointer is stuck on".

So, with voluntary attention, we are choosing to focus on the object of attention. On the other hand, with involuntary attention, the object is controlling; drawing our attention to itself, wanted or not. It is important to understand the nature of attention. It affects everything we do. Our ability to function is completely dependent on it.

The next state of consciousness in the progression towards meditation is **concentration**. Concentration is the power of the mind. Concentration occurs when one holds attention on one thing for an extended period of time. The better the concentration, the more powerful the mind.

**Concentration is power.** This is not only a mental phenomenon. For example: do you remember as a child when you used to hold a magnifying glass so the sun would shine through it? The shape of the glass causes the amount of light coming through one side of the glass to be focused down into one small little point, depending on how you focus the lens. The same amount of light, but in a much smaller space. Light and heat are simply two different manifestations of the same energy. When you take a larger amount of energy and put it into a smaller space you have concentrated that energy. In the case of the magnifying glass, if that light becomes concentrated enough it can burn a hole in what you have it focused on.

**Concentration is power.** Power itself is unconcerned with good or bad, happy or sad, or anything like that. That falls under the aegis of wisdom. That is, power is blind to good or evil. Therefore, power can

be used for both good and evil. If you wish to have a clear understanding of the good and bad things in your life, pay closer attention to how and on what you are concentrating.

Ted Williams was the last major leaguer to bat .400 in a season. He attributed his great hitting to his ability to concentrate at the plate. Williams said that he was able to see individual seams on a baseball as it was coming to the plate. Now that balls coming toward him at 90 miles an hour and God knows how fast it is spinning on its own axis. Williams' concentration was so finely attuned to the ball that he was able to see individual seams on that ball on its way to the plate. With that degree of concentration, to him, it was more like hitting a beach ball than a baseball.

How about an inanimate example of, **concentration is power**. The nail is a common tool we use to attach two pieces of wood. What is it about the nail that gives it that ability? If you look at a nail, you will notice one end is flat and the other end is pointed. You place the pointed end on the wood and strike the flat end with your hammer. The energy from the hammer is transferred to the nail. Because the end of the nail touching the wood is pointed, all of the energy from the hammer strike is concentrated into a very small point on the surface of the wood. This allows the nail to pass between the fibers of the wood with relative ease. Try attaching two pieces of wood by placing the flat end of the nail on the wood and striking the pointed end. You might get a different result.

**Concentration is power.** Power is the ability to do work. If you want to do, whatever it is that you want to do, better and faster, improve your concentration.

After concentration comes **meditation**. In a way meditation is actually a cycling back to awareness. Meditation usually occurs after one has been concentrating for an extended period of time. Actually, meditation occurs when the mental boundary between yourself and that on which you are concentrating upon falls away (remember the relationship between the one and all in field theory). Actually meditation isn't something that you do. Meditation is something that happens to you. In fact, when truly meditating, there is no you. When meditating you are unified with the one, or God, or whatever you

choose to call it. When the you drops away, so does the suffering. It is the ego that does all the suffering. (Note for later on, the difference between pain and suffering).

### **The Meditation Technique**

It is now time to discuss the meditation technique, and the challenges you will face while practicing.

Attending to the breath is one of the simplest things you can do. But don't mistake this simplicity as meaning it is easy or not profound. The mind and body have many habits, which will sidetrack you. One of the keys to meditation is to not struggle with these distractions. "All things come and go in their time, if they don't get stuck in your mind". Struggling with your distractions energizes them.

In meditation you want to stay focused on the established point of focus, in this case, the breath. Just try to keep your focus on the breath 100% of the time. You want to attend to each instant of every in breath, and each instant of every out breath. You should also attend to the moments between each breath.

When meditating on the breath, you want to focus on the physical sensation of the breath only. The sensation of the air passing through your nostrils as you breathe. Do not try to evaluate your breath. Do not imagine the flow of the breath in your airway and lungs. Simply breathe and attend to the sensation of breathing. The goal of single pointed meditation is that the point of focus serves as an anchor for your mind. This anchor allows your focus to remain still, while the stream of thoughts, feelings, other physical sensations and environmental conditions flows through your mind and body. However, do not try to block these things. Blocking just sets up a struggle which eventually unravels later on. Of course, a calm mind is the state you want to achieve, but not by blocking things.

Blocking things from your mind is like building a dam on a river. When you build a dam on a river, you stop the flow of the river downstream from the dam. The downstream flow is stopped, and it is



peaceful there. However, the river is still flowing from its source upstream from the dam. In order to keep stopping the flow downstream you must constantly build the dam higher and higher (if your blocking) to contain the upstream flow. Even if you are successful in doing this, the pressure of the upstream flow on the dam will eventually cause it to break. This is your 19th Nervous Breakdown (a deluge of damage rather than a smaller ongoing flow of damage).

So you don't want to stop the flow of thoughts, feelings and sensations from your awareness. Let them flow as they will. Your goal is to attend to the breath, not to the flow. It's as if you were sitting on one bank of the river gazing at a tree on the opposite bank. As you're doing this, you will notice all the things floating by in the river. Perhaps you will see a log, a boat, or anything at all floating on the surface of the river. These things will come into your field of vision (awareness), they will stay for a while, and eventually pass on, as long as you maintain your focus on the tree. You're aware of the presence of these things, but you're not paying attention to them. The only thing you're attending to is the tree on the opposite bank. If you pay attention to things floating in a river, your mind will move right along with them. Stay on the tree. If the things floating in the river do get the focus of your attention, and they will many times, return your focus back to the tree (your breath) as soon as you become aware that your attention has shifted.

Another way of looking at this is to imagine you are a boat on the river and you wish to hold your position at one point on the river. In order to do this, you throw out your anchor. The anchor grips the riverbed and therefore holds you still at this point on the river. The anchor doesn't stop the flow of the river, it just keeps the boat still. Again, you may notice all manner of flotsam and jetsam flowing downstream, but you, the boat, remain still. Concentration on the breath is your anchor. If you focus on the things flowing downstream you weigh anchor and flow right along with them, bringing you all of the pain and excitement that goes along with them.

Maintaining concentration on the breath gradually de-energizes the conditions of your mind creating delusion, illusion and all manner of suffering. This is more like a river flowing into a great desert. The

flow of the river is gradually reduced to a trickle and then nothing at all this is how true peace and tranquility comes to the mind.

Engaging in the regular practice of meditation is probably the best thing you will ever do for yourself. In order to be successful in doing this, you should try to meditate at the same time and place each day. This will help you to establish daily meditation as a habit. Habits are not only damaging, they are also quite useful (more on this later). Sit with your back straight. You don't want to be leaning left or right, forward or back. Maintaining a straight back while meditating, means the back is less likely to become tired and sore after long periods of meditation. Facing straight ahead, your nose should be in line with your navel. Shoulders should be parallel with the floor. Tuck in your chin slightly. Gaze down at the floor or the wall in front of you (at approximately the same angle as the bridge of your nose). Hold the gaze steady; try not move your eyes around too much. To accomplish this, you may want to hold some mark on the floor or wall in the center of your field of vision. Remember this is a gentle nonspecific gaze. You're not looking at the mark, you're simply using it as an anchor to hold your gaze in the same place (sound familiar).

Begin attending to the breath as described earlier. After a while, and probably a short while, you will notice that your attention has shifted to some thought, sound, physical sensation, or something other than your breath. When this happens, simply return your attention to the breath. Unless you're already a meditation master, you will need to do this repeatedly, over and over again, many times during your meditation session. One of the challenges you will face is to not become frustrated by this. Simply return your attention to the breath as soon as you become aware that you're focusing on anything else but the breath. Do not struggle to release the distractions. Do not struggle to keep your concentration on the breath. Do not struggle in your meditation at all. This attitude, and mental posture, should be maintained from the very beginning of the session to the very end. Always, be patient with yourself. The elusive and destructive habits of your mind have taken years to develop. Be patient with your practice. Never engage in self-criticism, especially during meditation. Refrain from telling yourself, "I can't do this". Sometimes your attention will wander to something terrible. Sometimes it will wander onto something great. All of these conditions are to be treated equally; as

soon as you become aware that the attention has wandered off the breath, return it to the breath. Do not try to hold anything else in your attention, nor push anything away.

**Remember, no struggle.**