

Meditation Poem (On breathing)

From The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching, by Thich Nhat Hanh (pronounced Tick-Not-Han)

The fourth element of our body is air. The best way to experience the air element is the practice of mindful breathing. "Breathing in, I know I am breathing in. Breathing out, I know I am breathing out." After saying these sentences we can abbreviate them by saying "In" as we breathe in and "Out" as we breathe out. We don't try to control our breathing. Whether our in-breath is long or short, deep or shallow, we just breathe naturally and shine the light of mindfulness on it. When we do this we notice that, in fact, our breathing does become slower and deeper naturally. "Breathing in, my in-breath has become deep. Breathing out, my out-breath has become slow." Now we can practice, "Deep/slow." We don't have to make an extra effort. It just becomes deeper and slower by itself, and we recognize that.

Later on, you will notice that you have become calmer and more at ease. "Breathing in, I feel calm. Breathing out, I feel at ease. I am not struggling anymore. Calm/ease." And then, "Breathing in, I smile. Breathing out, I release all my worries and anxieties. Smile/release." We are able to smile to ourselves and release all our worries. There are more than three hundred muscles in our face, and when we know how to breathe in and smile, these muscles can relax. This is "mouth yoga." We smile and are able to release all our feelings and emotions. The last practice is, "Breathing in, I dwell deeply in the present moment. Breathing out, I know this is a wonderful moment. Present moment/wonderful moment." Nothing is more precious than being in the present moment fully alive and aware.

*"In, out
Deep, slow
Calm, ease
Smile, release
Present moment, wonderful moment.*

If you use this poem during sitting or walking meditation, it can be very nourishing and healing. Practice each line for as long as you wish.

Another practice to help us be aware of our breathing is counting. As you breathe in, count "one" and as you breathe out, count "one" again. Then "Two/two," "Three/three," until you arrive at ten. After that, go back in the other direction: "Ten/ten," "Nine/nine," and so on, until you arrive back at one. If you do get lost go back to "one" and begin again. Relax. It's only a game. When you succeed in counting, you can drop the numbers if you like and just say "in" and "out." Conscious breathing is a joy."

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Vietnamese Buddhist monk. His lifelong efforts toward peace -- particularly during the war in Vietnam - inspired Martin Luther King, Jr. to nominate him for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1967. He lives in exile in a small community, Plum Village (www.plumvillage.org), in France where he teaches, writes, gardens, and works to help refugees worldwide.

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