

## Zen Breath | Care + Joy

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Be Kind to Your Breath...on the breath in Zen  
- Edward Espe Brown

"Zen," my teachers used to say, "is to settle the self on the self." Katagiri Roshi, when he said this, would point first to his head and then to his abdomen. What he was illustrating, simply speaking, was how we must bring the awareness—which tends to reside in the head—to the sensations of breath in the abdomen. Nothing to it: in Zen you come down to earth—down from the citadel of thinking into the body of breath.

You sit upright, taking, as it were, your "best" posture. With your hands palm-up on your knees, taking a few moments to carefully lean from side to side, then slightly forward, then slightly back, you find the place where you can sit right in the center, not slouching or slumping, not leaning forward or backward, to the left or to the right.

Then you are encouraged to "settle into immobile sitting." You allow your body to settle onto the cushion or chair, and your mind to settle into your breath. The suggestion is to take two or three deeper breaths through the mouth, drawing in a full inhalation and releasing the breath in a complete exhalation (silently, by all means!), a way to let go of accumulated tensions at the start of sitting.

After that you place your hands in your lap with the palms facing upward, the left hand on top of the right, fingers on top of fingers, the tips of your thumbs touching, your hands forming an oval opening. Perhaps your right wrist rests lightly on your right thigh. Behind your hands is where you focus on the breath in the abdomen. In Japanese it's called the hara, a spot said to be about two inches below the navel.

Who knows better how to breathe, you or your breath?

When I was first studying Zen, we were taught to "follow" the breath and also to "count" the breath. The sense of following the breath is that the thinking mind—the self in the head—is not directing or leading the breath, not telling it what

to do or how to be: it's not telling it to be longer, deeper, or calmer, but allowing the breath to fulfill itself, allowing the breath in the abdomen to "inform" the body/mind.

After all, who knows better how to breathe, you or your breath? It's perhaps like giving the horse the reins, and letting it take you home. Some trust is involved. Still, "following" may not be quite right, as you cannot actually let the breath go "ahead" of your awareness. So you breathe, perhaps, in the spirit of giving your awareness over to the breath, or as my teachers used to say, "taking the best care of your breath."

For years Suzuki Roshi emphasized counting the breath: the first exhalation, "one," the next exhalation, "two," and so forth up to ten. If you got to ten—or you lost count—you were to start again at one. Again and again Roshi reminded us that this was not about counting, but a way to help us bring the thinking mind onto the breath in the abdomen, and to encourage us to tend or take care of our breath. In one lecture, for instance, he mentioned having a feeling of kindness for your breath: "If we do not have some warm, big satisfaction in our practice, that is not true practice. Even though you sit, trying to have the right posture and counting your breath, it may still be lifeless zazen, because you are just following instructions. You are not kind enough with yourself. Be very kind with your breathing, one breath after another."

Another suggestion was to be "one with the breath," following the breath so closely that it "disappears." Have your awareness move exactly with the breath. Let your whole body breathe.

Implicit in this breath-awareness practice in Zen is the importance of posture. Because of the emphasis on impeccable uprightness, which is not your accustomed posture, you are implicitly inviting your breath to be different than it usually is—that is, to expand and open into the full extension of the body. Sometimes you may hear your breath saying, "Thank goodness, at last someone is giving me space to breathe."

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Occasionally someone would ask about instructions mentioned in books they had read to “put strength into the exhalation,” or “push down on the exhalation,” and Suzuki Roshi would say that while it might be a good idea, most people tended to overdo it, so he did not teach it. What he did say was that “if you exhale smoothly, without even trying to exhale, you are entering into the complete perfect calmness of your mind. The important point is your exhalation. Instead of trying to feel yourself as you inhale, fade into emptiness as you exhale. You become one with everything after you completely exhale with this feeling. If you are still alive, naturally you will inhale again, ‘Oh, I’m still alive!’ ”

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To be still alive is a miracle. The greatest of all miracles is to be alive, and when you breathe in, you touch that miracle. Therefore, your breathing can be a celebration of life.

- Thich Nhat Hahn

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Mindful Breathing  
- Thich Nhat Hahn

This technique is simple but the power, the result, can be very great. The exercise is simply to identify the in-breath as in-breath and the out-breath as the out-breath. When you breathe in, you know that this is your in-breath. When you breathe out, you are mindful that this is your out-breath.

Just recognize: this is an in-breath, this is an out-breath. Very simple, very easy. In order to recognize your in-breath as in-breath, you have to bring your mind home to yourself.

What is recognizing your in-breath is your mind, and the object of your mind—the object of your mindfulness—is the in-breath. Mindfulness is always mindful of something. When you drink your tea mindfully, it’s called mindfulness of drinking. When you walk mindfully, it’s called mindfulness of walking. And when you breathe mindfully, that is mindfulness of breathing.

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So the object of your mindfulness is your breath, and you just focus your attention on it. Breathing in, this is my in-breath. Breathing out, this is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don’t think anymore. You don’t have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don’t think of the past anymore. You don’t think of the future. You don’t think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath.

The breath can be a celebration of the fact that you are alive, so it can be very joyful. And the object of your meditation may then become joy!

It gets even better. You can enjoy your breath. The practice can be pleasant, joyful. Someone who is dead cannot take any more breaths. But you are alive. You are breathing in, and while breathing in, you know that you are alive. When you are joyful and happy, you don’t feel that you have to make any effort at all. I am alive; I am breathing in.

An in-breath may take three, four, five seconds, it depends. That’s time to be alive, time to enjoy your breath. You don’t have to interfere with your breathing. If your in-breath is short, allow it to be short. If your out-breath is long, let it to be long. Don’t try to change it. The practice is simple recognition of the in-breath and the out-breath. It has a powerful effect.