

An extract from Mindfulness Exercises:

## 1. Self-Awareness

### *Watching the Breath of Life*

The breath is the fine line between life and death. It is a powerful, essential function of life that sweeps through all sentient beings. The breath is the one thing that makes every sentient being equal, no matter its perceived intelligence or capability. But because breathing comes so easily to us when we are in good health, we naturally take its function for granted and seldom engage in using it to our full advantage.

The breath isn't just our life force, though. It has an incredible ability to change the way we think and feel; thus the saying 'take a deep breath'. When in a state of anxiety, focussing on slowing the breath's tempo has a profound affect on the body's disposition. As you breathe in deeply, the diaphragm drops downward, making room for your lungs to expand as they fill with air. As you breathe out, the diaphragm presses back upward against your lungs, helping to expel not just carbon dioxide but also anxiety and tension from the body. Breathing deeply in this way also slows heart rate and helps stabilise blood pressure.

In meditation, we use the breath as a tool to release negative energy, cultivate relaxation and prepare the mind for stillness. We use the breath to reconnect us with a pure awareness of what is, to bring us into the present moment and realign us with Mother Nature.

Focusing on the breath helps us enter a meditative state, assisting us in finding the mental spaciousness required to release attachment and aversion. In essence, the breath is used to bring the mind home and free us from the grasping that causes our day-to-day mental suffering.

In this first exercise, we're going to use the breath to cultivate a profound awareness of existence. This is a mentally liberating exercise that will help you find a sanctuary of peace in the present moment. This exercise is best suited to a place of quiet, where you feel comfortable enough to close your eyes and relax for ten minutes. I recommend sitting in the garden, or the park if the weather is suitable. If you can't go outside, use a quiet room in your home.

### **Step 1:**

Sit down on the floor or on a chair. If you are unable to sit, stay standing – just make sure you feel comfortable. Don't lie down, as you don't want to tempt the brain into falling asleep. If you can, assume a cross-legged meditation (lotus) position. This position is highly conducive to optimal breathing and will help you get the most from this exercise.

### **Step 2:**

Once you are comfortable, close your eyes. Begin by taking slow, deep breaths. Breathe in through your nose, and then effortlessly out through your mouth.

After a couple of minutes, gradually allow your breathing cycle to lengthen. Breathe in for approximately three seconds and then exhale for the same. Don't strain to hold your breath at any point; just settle into a deep rhythm that you feel comfortable with.

### **Step 3:**

Focus solely on your breathing, ignoring your thought stream and internal narrator. Let thoughts come and go of their own will, noticing

them for what they are (just thoughts) and allowing them to drift away as you continue to focus on your breath. If you are distracted by an external noise, do the same; simply notice it for what it is and let it drift away into the atmosphere. If you recognise a sound that begins to pull at your attention, identify it, let it go and return to the breath. The purpose of this exercise is to connect fully with your breath, taking leave from all external distraction.

[End of extract]