

Joy Practice

Focus and Stress Relief – A Breathing Practice

Joy Practices from the Book of Joy, conversations between the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu

Our breath is so important as a focus of spiritual practice in many religious traditions because it is the hinge between our self and the world. Our breath is internal, but it is also external. Breath is also both voluntary and involuntary. It is an ideal doorway through which we can develop our self-cultivation. Focus, as you may remember, is so important that neuroscientist Richard Davidson found that one of four neural circuits of well-being was dedicated to our ability to focus the mind. Simply observing quiet time, which the Archbishop maintains in the predawn hours, afternoon, and evening, is another way to focus our mind, relieve stress, and concentrate on what matters most.

Find a quiet place where you can practice consistently. This way the physical place – a room, a corner. A cushion – will help signal to your body that this is a time for your practice.

Sit comfortably. If you are sitting on a cushion or chair, try to lean slightly forward, away from the back of the chair so that your back will be straight. If you have chronic back pain, adjust as necessary.

Close your eyes or keep them slightly open in a restful position.

Place your hand gently on your knees or in your lap.

Focus your attention on your breath.

Breathe in deeply through your nose as your belly expands. As a jug of water fills from the bottom, your lungs should also fill from the bottom.

Breath out slowly.

On each inhalation you can think in, and on each exhalation you can think out. Alternatively, you can count each breath after each exhalation.

You can count out five to ten breaths and then repeat. If you lose your focus and your mind begins to wander, as minds do, just gently bring your attention back to your breath. You can start by doing this for five to ten minutes and extend the time as your practice develops.

If you are feeling particularly stressed, you can imagine each breath bringing in calming cool air and it spreading throughout your body. Then, as you release your breath, you can imagine the stress leaving your body from the neck, shoulders, back, tummy, or wherever you tend to hold on to stress.