

Instructions on Counting the Breath

Thích Nhất Hạnh

To be read slowly to a friend or silently to yourself:

Your breath should be light, even and flowing, like a thin stream of water running through the sand. Your breath should be very quiet, so quiet that a person sitting next to you cannot hear it. Your breathing should flow gracefully, like a river, like a water snake crossing the water, and not like a chain of rugged mountains or the gallop of a horse.

To master our breath is to be in control of our bodies and minds. Each time we find ourselves dispersed and find it difficult to gain control of ourselves by different means, the method of watching the breath should always be used.

The instant you sit down to meditate, begin watching your breath. At first breathe normally, gradually letting your breathing slow down until it is quiet, even and the lengths of the breaths fairly long. From the moment you sit down to the moment your breathing has become deep and silent, be conscious of everything that is happening in yourself....

Making your breath calm and even is called the method of following one's breath. If it seems hard at first, you can substitute the method of counting your breath. As you breathe in, count 1 in your mind, and as you breathe out, count 2. Continue through 10; then return to 1 again. This counting is like a string that attaches your mindfulness to your breath.

This exercise is the beginning point in the process of becoming continually conscious of your breath. Without mindfulness, however, you will quickly lose count. When the count is lost, simply return to 1 and keep trying until you can keep the count correctly. Once you can truly focus your attention on the counts, you have reached the point at which you can begin to abandon the counting method and begin to concentrate solely on the breath itself.