Chapter 1
Allowing the Mind to Breathe

The overwhelming majority of people have very busy minds. This is different from saying that we are always very busy, because, often when we are doing very little, the mind is still working very hard. Even when we sit down to rest or go to sleep, the mind keeps on churning out thoughts, feelings and mental chatter. In fact, wherever we find ourselves, the mind is generally absorbed in some kind of activity such as reading, writing, chatting or otherwise entertaining itself. And for those occasions when we find ourselves with nothing in particular to do, there are various tactics that we use in order to keep boredom at bay. For example, if we are stuck in traffic on the motorway or travelling alone on an aeroplane or train, we will often occupy ourselves by reminiscing about the past, planning out the future, or living-out some other kind of mental drama. Regardless of whether we are engaging in an activity involving another object or person, or whether we are playing out a fantasy in our minds, there is invariably another layer of background-thought occurring that has nothing to do with the particular task, person or situation in front of us.

In effect, we allow our mind to do whatever it wants, whenever it wants. We give little thought to the type of mind that we are cultivating, and whether our ‘mental conduct’ will be beneficial or harmful to our long-term wellbeing or the wellbeing of others. There is a saying that ‘you become what you think’. However, traditional Buddhist teachings, and certain cognitive behavioural psychotherapeutic approaches, suggest that ‘you become how you think’. In other words, our psychological wellbeing has less to do with the specific content of our thoughts or mental chatter, and more to do with whether we are aware of what we are thinking and whether we allow the mind to be easily distracted.
According to the UK’s Mental Health Foundation, 25% of adults experience a mental health problem during the course of one year. A number of psychologists – including ourselves – attribute these alarming figures to people developing maladaptive cognitive and behavioural processes. This basically means that people fall into bad thinking habits and allow those thoughts and beliefs to influence their behaviour. Indeed, whilst people often go to great lengths to groom the body in order to make it attractive, very few make the same effort when it comes to grooming the mind.

This is how one office manager described the effects of neglecting the mind when she was interviewed during one of our research projects:

Here in the West, people think that if you’ve been through the education system then that’s your mental development complete. That’s you set up for the rest of your life. But so much is left untouched. Nobody takes the time to show you how to truly care for the mind, how to stop yourself becoming stressed and worn out, or how to stop the mind from suffocating or racing away with itself. It’s like we prefer people to be intelligent rather than decent and rounded human beings. But being intelligent doesn’t stop you from becoming unhappy, or it doesn’t stop you becoming a pig in the way you treat others.¹

Letting the Mind Breathe

Given the mind’s tendency to act like a headless chicken and jump between one mental drama and another, how do we begin to slow the mind down and become less erratic in our thought processes? One tried and tested way to do this is to introduce and make use of what is

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termed a ‘meditative anchor’. Probably the most popular meditative anchor used in both the traditional Buddhist teachings and modern-day clinical mindfulness interventions is ‘breath awareness’. Becoming aware of and following the breath helps to slow down and ‘anchor’ the mind so that it becomes difficult for us to be distracted or carried away by our thoughts and feelings.

As we will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter, the practice of mindfulness is fundamentally concerned with becoming more aware of the present moment. Unruly minds and faulty thinking patterns tend to prevent us from settling our awareness in the here and now. The reason we want to try to remain aware of the present moment is because, really and truly, this is the only place where we can fully experience life. The future itself will never materialise, and so fantasizing about it is not a productive use of our time. The future never materialises because it is always the present. We can never be in the future and we can never predict with 100% accuracy how it will unfold. Likewise, the past is history and no longer exists. It is only a memory and so clinging onto the past is equally unfruitful.

Using breath awareness as a meditative anchor is a means of ‘tying’ the mind to the present moment. If we have not trained ourselves in mindfulness practice, then attempting to remain fully aware of the present moment without the use of a concentration anchor is probably going to be difficult. However, by gently resting our awareness on our breathing, we give the mind a reference point. The breath becomes a place where the mind can return to each time it wanders off or gets lost in thoughts. You might think that becoming aware of the breath is an easy and obvious thing to do. However, be completely honest and ask yourself: how many times during the day are you truly aware of the fact that you are breathing? How often do you stop and think ‘I am alive and I am breathing in and out?’ Because breathing happens automatically, most people tend to take it for granted.
Following the breath is a practical way to develop mindful awareness and to anchor ourselves in the present moment. In fact, breathing in and out is something that we are (hopefully) always doing, and so simply bringing our attention to the breath should not inconvenience us or require a large time commitment. However, over and above convenience, there are a number of important reasons for using the breath as a meditative anchor. Most importantly, research demonstrates that breath awareness helps to slow down the heart rate and to calm and relax the body. The body and mind are very closely related and so if we want to slow down and quieten the mind such that it can be observed and investigated, then it helps if we do the same with body.

There are other reasons for using the breath to stabilise and calm the mind, and these mostly relate to some of the subtler aspects of meditation. For example, the breath is what connects the body to the world around us. Each time we breathe in, we breathe in a part of our world, and each time we breathe out, a part of us enters and joins the world around us. In fact, with each breath we take, we breathe in the wind and since there is water vapour in the wind, we also breathe in the oceans, lakes and rivers. Likewise, when we breathe out, parts of our breath are carried by the wind and are gradually absorbed by the world and its inhabitants. Therefore, if we decided to practise mindfulness by just sitting down quietly in a chair and simply following our breathing, with each breath in and out we would be perfectly entitled to gently self-guide our meditation by using phrases such as: ‘breathing in, I follow my breath in’, ‘breathing out, I follow my breath out’; ‘breathing in, I breathe in the world’, ‘breathing out, I breathe out the world’; ‘breathing in, I feel nourished by the earth’, ‘breathing out, I feel rooted in the earth’.

Awareness of breathing helps to synchronise the internal winds of the body and mind with the winds of the external world. We will discuss the principle and science of interconnectedness later in this book but a key point to remember is that using the breath to
stabilise and synchronise the mind does not mean that we have to force or modify our breathing. In other words, the breath should be allowed to follow its natural course and to calm and deepen of its own accord. Forced breathing runs contrary to the general principle of meditation which is that tranquillity and wisdom are naturally present in the mind and will arise of their own accord when the correct conditions come about. One of these ‘correct conditions’ is simply observing and nourishing the body and mind by practising mindful awareness.

A metaphor that might help explain this notion is that of a garden fish pond. Every time the garden pond is stirred or interfered with, the water becomes muddy and disturbed. However, if a person sits quietly next to the pond and simply observes it, the water becomes perfectly still and clear again. Thus, we don’t have to interfere with the mind for it to become calm and clear. All we have to do is sit in quiet and observe the mind.

We would like to share with you something that happened when we were guiding a meditation retreat a few years ago in the Snowdonia Mountains of North Wales. Having explained to the retreat participants how to breathe correctly and the importance of not forcing the breath, we began to guide a seated meditation session. One of the people seated in the meditation hall was a middle-aged lady who was extremely stressed and who desperately needed to unwind and relax. Part way through the meditation, it became apparent that one of the male participants in the group was a ‘breather’. ‘Breathers’ are those people who breathe really deeply and loudly during meditation so that everybody else can hear them, and so that everybody knows they are ‘serious’ about their practice. About half way through the meditation session, it all became too much for the lady who broke her silence and in a frustrated voice suddenly shouted out ‘stop breathing’. Obviously, the lady’s response was a bit excessive and everybody laughed about it later. However, it raises the point that when we
are with other people, we should always consider whether our practice is cultivating – or disrupting – the harmony of the environment around us, and this includes the way we breathe.

**Generous Breathing**

A further important consideration concerning how we use the breath during mindfulness practice relates to the type and amount of attention that we allocate towards observing our breathing. For example, there are certain types of meditation practice where the practitioner is required to focus solely on the breath or on another given object. In general, such forms of meditation involve narrowing one’s attention and blocking out or ignoring all other psychological or sensory experiences. However, a potential drawback of meditating in this manner is that it has limited application in real-world settings, and encourages reliance on a peaceful external environment in order to cultivate a peaceful internal environment.

If we are going to walk the path of the Mindful Warrior and face everything life throws at us with confidence and equanimity, then we need a meditative technique that is unconditionally accepting, and that is not reliant on the external environment in which we find ourselves. Therefore, when we rest our attention on the natural flow of the in-breath and out-breath, we should do so by using a very broad and generous (rather than a narrow) form of attention. In other words, mindful breathing requires us to be aware of each and every part of each and every breath, but in a way that enables us to be completely open to, and aware of, everything else that we encounter. This is why we refer to the breath as an anchor. Its purpose is to provide stability so that we can remain rooted enough to embrace and experience the present moment in all of its beauty and splendour.

It may sound as though two different forms of attention are employed during mindfulness practice – a finer type of attention that focuses on the breathing, and a more expansive type of attention that encompasses and remains aware of everything else that we
experience. Conceptually speaking, this may be true. However, in reality, it is not particularly helpful to bog ourselves down in trying to analyse all of the different attentional or cognitive skills utilised during mindfulness practice. Where we really need to concentrate our efforts at this stage is on starting to integrate mindfulness into all aspects of our lives and on developing an understanding of mindfulness that is based on experience and practice, and not on theory or intellectualising.

Working on the assumption that the average respiratory rate of a healthy adult is approximately 15 breathes per minute, this means that we breathe in and out 21,600 times each day. Every single breath in and out provides us with an opportunity to cultivate mindful awareness and to nourish our inner being. In fact, each in-breath and out-breath could be thought of as an entirely new phase of our lives. We breathe in and are fully aware of all parts of the in-breath, from the point where it enters the body at the tips of the nostrils to the point where it gives way to the out-breath. We are intricately aware of the beginning part of the in-breath, the middle-part of the in-breath and the final part of the in-breath. We are aware of its texture, its weight, its flavour and its temperature. We feel the in-breath as it enters the lungs and causes them to expand. With each breath in, we feel the surge of energy that flows through our veins and nourishes every cell of the body.

Next comes the out-breath. We experience each part of the out-breath as it flows out of the body and dissolves into the air around us. Interestingly however, before we breathe out, there is a brief period where the breath finds itself in no man’s land. This is the period of transition between the in-breath and out-breath (and between the out-breath and in-breath) where there exists empty space that we can recognise and relax into. The more we practise mindful breathing, the more we are able to recognise this empty space and use it as a means of cultivating wisdom. We will discuss this idea in more detail later in this book but at this stage the main point to understand is that depending on our level of awareness, it is possible
to experience life on a breath-by-breath basis. Indeed, the more we practise breath awareness, the more we become attuned to all that happens in a single breath cycle. It is almost as though time begins to expand and the present moment starts to last for longer. Each breath in and out becomes a significant and enjoyable part of our life. This is a generous way to live and breathe, and it allows us to be continuously nourished by spiritual and meditative awareness.

The Breath of the Mindful Warrior

By remaining aware of our breathing, we equip ourselves to venture into the present moment without fear of it causing us to lose our ground or be drawn back into mindlessness and confusion. We gently rest and maintain our awareness on our breathing as we go about each of our daily tasks. If we are walking outside or in the home, we do so while calmly attending to our breathing. The same applies to working at the computer, playing with the kids, taking a shower, making love or talking with a friend on the mobile phone – all of these activities should be conducted whilst trying to remain aware of each and every breath.

At first, the practice of observing the breath requires deliberate effort and it is easy to lose awareness. Don’t worry or chastise yourself if you do. Upon losing awareness all we have to do is recognise that our attention has gone astray and then gently return our awareness back to the cycle of breathing. In fact, each time we notice that we have lost concentration and drifted into mindlessness, we should quietly congratulate ourselves for having recognised that the mind has wandered off again. Becoming aware of the mind’s tendency to be distracted is one of the first signs that we are making progress and that our practice is moving in the right direction.

Although the practice of mindful breathing requires deliberate effort and can be quite a change from the way we normally go through the day, with sustained practice, remaining aware of the breath becomes a natural thing to do. In time, the practice starts to happen
almost automatically. After we have tasted the benefits of breath awareness, we begin to see just how exposed we were to stress, confusion, and exhaustion before we adopted the practice of mindful living. When we are attending to our breathing correctly, the whole body becomes light and energised – as though we are carried by a calming wind that gently supports and stays with us wherever we go. This is consistent with scientific investigations where it has been shown that conscious breathing facilitates relaxation and leads to a slowing-down of the heart rate, respiratory rate, perspiration rate, and other bodily functions controlled by the involuntary nervous system.

Paying attention to our breathing enables us to relax into the present moment. Whatever we experience, we observe it, taste it and enjoy it. But we also let go of it. We breathe in noticing and experiencing our external environment, and we breathe out noticing and experiencing our internal, psychological environment. Sounds come and go, sights come and go, smells come and go, sensations come and go, and thoughts and feelings come and go. Whatever happens, we remain with our breathing and let the present moment unfold around us. We observe the present moment and we also participate in it. So long as we are consciously breathing, the present moment becomes our home and we are never lost.

By anchoring ourselves in the here and now with our breathing, we construct the meditative foundations necessary for progressing along the path of the Mindful Warrior. The Mindful Warrior is able to accept and deal with whatever the present moment throws at them. This is because their breath has become their place of permanent residence. They are always aware of their breathing and therefore, they are always at home. Nothing can shake them or cause them to panic. The Mindful Warrior is unconditionally courageous and confident in everything they do. They breathe in and say to themselves, ‘breathing in, I am fully aware of my breathing’, and they breathe out and say to themselves ‘breathing out, I am alive, perfectly free and without fear’. The Mindful Warrior understands that they are deeply
connected with the earth around them. They understand that as they breathe in, the universe breathes in and that as they breathe out, the universe breathes out.

**A Guided Meditation on Mindful Breathing**

To conclude this chapter on breath awareness, we have prepared the following guided meditation on mindful breathing. You can spend as little or as much time as you wish practising this meditation. However, whether you choose to practise for five minutes or half an hour, the most important thing is to try to practise regularly. We suggest that you try to practise this meditation two or three times each day – once in the morning when you first wake up, again in the middle of the day, and once more in the evening. Try to find somewhere quiet when you practise the meditation and please do your best to carry your practice with you when you have finished meditating.

1. *Breathing in, I am fully aware that I breathe in; breathing out, I am fully aware that I breathe out.*

2. *Breathing in, I am aware whether my breath is deep or shallow, short or long; breathing out, I allow my breath to follow its natural course.*

3. *Breathing in, I enjoy breathing in; breathing out, I enjoy breathing out and I smile gently to myself.*

4. *Breathing in, I am fully aware of each individual moment of my breath; breathing out, I taste and experience the texture of breath.*

5. *Breathing in, I am aware of whether my breath is hot or cold; breathing out, I am aware of my lungs as they rise and fall.*

6. *Breathing in, I inhale the wind and the oceans; breathing out, I feel rooted in the earth.*
7. Breathing in, as I breathe in, the universe breathes in; breathing out, as I breathe out, the universe breathes out.

8. Breathing in, I am aware of the space and time that exists between my in-breath and out-breath, and between my out-breath and in-breath; breathing out, I relax into this space and time.

9. Breathing in, there is nowhere else I need to be; breathing out, I am already home.

10. Breathing in, I enjoy being alive; breathing out, I enjoy simply being.