

Guo Gu

*Meditation Month 2021: Silent Illumination*

Week 2: “Breathe and Experience”

March 8, 2021



Hello, my name is Guo Gu; welcome back to Tricycle's March Meditation Month. Today I'll be introducing what I call somatic integration. I want to talk about integration because most of the time in our lives, we're not integrated. Our body is doing one thing and our mind is doing something else. So, last week, I talked about how to bring it together.

I hope all of you have been practicing progressive relaxation every day. This week, we'll build on that. I like to use the method of meditation on the breath but in a particular way. First, I like to say that our breath and our bodies are indicators of where our mind is and how we actually feel throughout the day. So it's very important to be aware, to be in tune with the breath and body. You can think of this as a kind of a triangle, body-mind-breath. The important thing to know is we are so locked into our ruminations, discriminations, and discursive thinking in our headspace that we're really not in tune with the breath or the body. We're just locked into the mind. And very often, if we're in a bad mood, if we're in a not-so-good place, what we resort to is also with the mind, with words and language. We tell ourselves to relax. We tell ourselves to feel better or tell ourselves some teachings that we have heard. None of that really works. We can try to convince ourselves conceptually. The only way that's going to work is engaging with the breath and the body to influence the mind. These three are interlocking and connected.

So, after your daily practice of progressive relaxation, you should have developed a more keen awareness of how the breath is influencing the body and how the body is influencing the breath. Whenever you have wandering thoughts, you would have noticed some part of the body would have tensed up. Maybe there was a shift in the patterns of your breathing. So, if you haven't experienced that, I want you to pay closer attention to that.

So building on that foundation now, let's go to the breath. First, we have to relax the body, doing progressive relaxation section by section. There are three main areas: the eyes, the shoulders, and the abdomen. Once these three areas can relax our sense of body weight will be able to settle downwards. We will be more grounded, rooted to earth.

At that time, your breath will be the most suitable breath for meditation. What kind of breath is that? It's what we call subtle breath. It's inaudible. You know, you can hear some meditators when they sit. They believe that they have to breathe longer, deeper, so they're controlling their breath to be such a way. That's not the breath that we should have in meditation. So subtle breath means, first, inaudible. Second, by the time you have done the progressive relaxation, your breath will have settled down to approximately nine to ten rounds of breath per minute, maybe even fewer, five or six. Third, your breath will have moved from here [points to upper chest] to what we call abdominal breathing. Once the body is relaxed, and the weight is settled down to the ground, you will experience the rise and fall of your breath here [points to abdomen]. If any

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part of the body is tense—the eyes, the facial muscles, the shoulders, and all the muscle groups that are connected to the upper body—your breath will not be able to sink down to the abdomen. So these are the three qualities of subtle breath.

The way we meditate on the breath is first, we start with the nostrils. Now, if you have a lot of wandering thoughts, you need to count the breath from one to 10, with a number to each exhalation. So one number to each exhalation. If there's a lot of wandering thoughts, you can count backward from 20 to two and 19 to one; even numbers, and then odd numbers. So counting is something you can fall back on.

But really, we begin with the breath here [points to nostrils]. When you're meditating, you're feeling the sensation of the breath. Not only the in and out. The cool or warmth. The silkiness or coarseness. The lighter feeling or a little bit heavy, more turbulent. And of course, long or short. So once you meditate on all the different sensations here [points to nostrils], when you meditate on this, the key is a body that is relaxed, grounded, heart content, experiencing the breath.

The key is experiencing. Experiencing the sensations. So it doesn't really matter what the body is doing at that time or what the external environment is doing. Only focus on sensations, okay? Cool, warm, shallow, deep, silky, coarse, long, short—all the different sensations—until there's hardly any sensations here [points to nostrils]. So probably the first thing that will go is the sensations of cool or warmth, leaving you with only slight turbulence, the smoothness, light, and a little bit heavy, until the breath is so subtle here it's as if you don't know if the breath is going in or out. So the only way you know the breath is in or out is because of the sensations. At that time, you must still have a concrete method. So in that moment, the rise and fall of the stomach is more prominent. So in the beginning all the different sensations at your nostrils are more prominent; as this diminishes, later on, what's more prominent is the rise and fall of the stomach. So dropping from here [points to nostrils] to here [points to lower abdomen]. If the rise and fall are so subtle, maybe four or five breaths per minute, very grounded, very clear, at that time you can just expand the presence of sitting out to the whole body. At that time your breath will be the whole body breathing, all the pores. So, begin here [points to nostrils], end here [points to lower abdomen], and then grounding.

In this process, the stages of practice are important. One key thing to know is, wherever your mind is at, the method of practice must match it. If there's a mismatch, you will not be able to use the method well. What I mean by this is, if the mind is scattered, ruminating this and that, busy day, your method must be complex to grab the attention of the mind. If the method is very simple, for example just paying attention to sensations at the nostrils, the mind will be racing. So as the mind relaxes with a complex method, maybe counting backward with even numbers and

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then odd numbers, once the complex method grabs the attention of the mind, the mind settles. Then you don't need a complex method anymore. What you need is a simpler method: sensation [at the nostrils]. As the mind concentrates, bring it down to here [to the abdomen]. Just the rise and fall, just the tactile sensation. So, [gesturing with hands] scattered mind, then concentrated mind, then unified mind, and mind of awakening. We'll talk about that later in the series. Similarly with the method: [gesturing with hands] from a complex method, to a relatively simpler method, to a very clear and concrete, direct, simple method, leading you to a unified state. Does that make sense? So the method is very important, and the way we work with the method is very organic. The method is something that we come alive by knowing what to do.

Okay, so that is this week's teachings. Next week, I invite you to join what I call direct contemplation, which I'll talk about. The nature of perception and how to cultivate valid perception. Thank you.