



Three Breaths at a Time

If you can stick with wakefulness for just three full breaths, says

EZRA BAYDA, you can learn to bring meditative awareness into your day-to-day life, no matter what the circumstances.

ILLUSTRATION BY MOLLY NUDELL

SOMETIMES THE SIMPLEST meditation techniques are also the most effective. Granted, all techniques can be misused—we can easily turn them into instruments for self-improvement, rather than use them as tools to help us wake up. We can get lost in techniques, and forget about the bigger picture. Nonetheless, techniques are essential for a long time, until eventually their inherent teaching becomes a part of who we are.

One simple but effective technique is called the three breaths practice. Normally, there are many times throughout the day when we “wake up,” when we become aware. On these occasions we leave the thought-world and are actually “here.” Unfortunately, most of the time these last only for a few seconds, and then we fall right back into “waking sleep,” where we are again lost in our thoughts or our drama and have very little awareness. Simple observation of our own life will verify that this is true. The point of this practice is to extend these moments of awareness, not just during sitting, but throughout our day-to-day living.

The three breaths practice is about injecting a conscious pause in the middle of our usual state of waking sleep, a pause that lasts the duration of three full breaths. Here’s how it works: Whenever you “come to” for a moment, you make the conscious intention to stay there for at least three full breaths. You don’t necessarily focus on the breath itself, but you stay with whatever your experience is. For example, if you “wake up” in the midst of impatience, becoming aware of your mental and physical state, don’t try to become patient. Simply feel—fully feel—the visceral texture of the present-moment experience. The commitment is to reside in that experience for three full breaths.

There’s a definite sensation of “being here” that can be cultivated by the three breaths practice. Try this brief experiment:

First bring attention to the breath, feeling the coolness as it enters the nostrils. Staying with the sensations of the breath, also experience the room. And staying with the air and the room, bring awareness now to the overall experience of the body—not specific sensations but the gestalt of the body in space, a sense of your own being—just sitting, breathing, and being in the room. Now stay with this, with as much attention as you can bring, for three full breaths. If you can do this, you’ll recognize the experience as one of being present, of being somewhat awake.

The three breaths practice is so helpful because it’s something we can actually do, and we can do it many times throughout the day. We all know that it’s not enough simply to want to wake up—the forces of sleep are powerful and unrelenting. This practice, which is not particularly difficult, can begin to bring moments of clarity and presence to our usual fog of waking sleep. Just settle into the moment and remind yourself to *feel this* for at least three full breaths.

The three breaths practice is also effective when we find ourselves in the midst of a painful or distressing experience. At such times, it is usually very difficult to stay present with our feelings. We have a natural aversion to discomfort, and as a consequence, our resistance to staying focused on the discomfort is often very strong. But it’s possible to “make a deal” with the resisting ego, by telling it that you will only stay with the discomfort for three breaths, at which point you’ll allow yourself to briefly divert from the present moment.

The ego is willing to make this arrangement because it maintains the illusion of control, which is one of ego’s main goals. So the practice is to literally tell yourself that you will feel the distress for only three full breaths, after which you will turn

away. You don't renege on the deal: after three breaths you allow yourself to drift into your normal diversions. Then, after a time, you make the same arrangement. You do it again and again, three breaths at a time.

What's amazing about the three breaths practice is that the ego is so willing to go along. Usually the resistance we feel makes our difficult experiences that much more difficult. But when the resistance is abated, even if only for three breaths at a time, we understand that it's more painful to push away the experience than it is to actually feel it. We learn this pivotal understanding three breaths at a time.

The three breaths practice may also be used when we are caught in one of our addictive tendencies, such as fantasizing, surfing the Web, or being very busy. These tendencies are seductive, and we normally have little interest in giving them up. But again it's possible to make a deal with the ego—in this case with the ego in its guise of addictive mind. The agreement is to stay with your experience of unease—the unease underlying the addiction—for just three breaths, after which you will willingly go back to your habitual behavior. For the duration of the three breaths you fully feel the experience of addiction. Then you let yourself go back to waking sleep. After a time, you make this arrangement again. And then again. You may find that after doing this several times, the circuitry of the addiction is naturally broken, and the seductive power of the addiction becomes less solid and more porous.

The only way to experience the value of the three breaths practice is to try it. Practice requires a conscious intention, and one way that conscious intention can be effectively applied is three breaths at a time. ♦

EZRA BAYDA received dharma transmission from Charlotte Joko Beck and teaches at Zen Center San Diego. He is the author of Being Zen, At Home in the Muddy Water and Saying Yes to Life (Even the Hard Parts), forthcoming in September from Wisdom Publications.