

upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation: mindfulness & naming

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To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing is the way of true living. Shunryu Suzuki

Many forms of stress management & meditation teach brief "*breathing space*" exercises that can be used to bring oneself into the present in a variety of helpful ways. These seem to have been particularly popularised by the 3 minute breathing space exercise (3MBS) taught in *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT)*. Zindel Segal (one of MBCT's developers) describes the development of this *Widen-Narrow-Widen* attentional sequence in a short online article. In fact a quick internet search turns up a plethora of freely downloadable, quick *Breathing Space* meditations - for example, from Jon Kabat-Zinn and from Mark Williams. In a somewhat similar way, *Mindful Self-Compassion (MCS)* teaches a meditation called the "*Self-Compassion Break*" that can be used as a longer practice or as a breathing space exercise. The "*Center for Mindful Self-Compassion*" website has a page of "*Guided Meditations & Exercises*" that gives information on several different practices, including a PDF describing the *Self-Compassion Break* and two downloadable MP3's of the exercise itself. One, by Chris Germer, is a rather longer practice taking about 12 minutes; while another, by Kristin Neff, has a 5 minute breathing space duration. Earlier still, in the *Autogenic Training Course* I taught for thirty years or so, at session six I introduced a variable length (3 breaths to several minutes) *Reminder Dot Exercise* that shares similarities with the 3MBS. And about five years ago, I went on to develop this further into a twelve-breath *Embodied-Cognition Exercise*. This is described in the blog post "*To reach the other shore with each step of the crossing: a brief embodied cognition meditation exercise*" with a couple of earlier posts filling in the background to this practice.

I do think that it's very worthwhile to develop personal forms of brief meditation practice to complement and to be used alongside longer 10 to 30 minute "formal" meditations. It's totally fine to use *MBSR/MBCT's 3MBS* exercise or *MCS's Self-Compassion Break* or even *Autogenic Training's Reminder Dot Exercise*. You may however get even more from a brief meditation practice if you've personalised it a bit. I'm going to present a dozen or so ideas that can be used to upgrade a basic mini-meditation practice. I have been practising meditation & yoga regularly since the beginning of the 1970's and began teaching these ideas later in that decade, so I have quite a lot of accumulated experience. More importantly though, for these suggestions, I also read a lot of research and most of the upgrade ideas I describe are based on recent research studies. If the thousands of papers being published on meditation, emotion regulation, and related fields can't help us become better at what we do, then science isn't doing its job! I suggest you don't try introducing all these new ideas at once. Pick and choose. See what works for you and experiment with further adaptations from the list later, if you'd like to. It is likely to be helpful to keep notes on your practice, at least to start with. Use the linked weekly practice record. See that on the second side of the sheet, there are spaces for observations where you can note how things are going and any ways you feel that your practice could be made even more helpful.

1.) The first "*upgrade*" suggestion is based on the finding that intentions that are concrete & specific are more likely to be achieved than those that are a bit woolly around the edges. I think the intention to make the breathing space about 3 minutes long is a bit woolly. Try making it a *twelve-breath exercise*. If the breaths are slightly extended in length, this may well end up being approximately a 3 minute exercise ... but twelve breaths is a very clear chunk to focus on whereas 3 minutes (without using a timer) is less clear. **2.)** I anchor these *twelve-breath practices* to events in my day (typically after breakfast & lunch, and in my evening bath) as well as using them during natural pauses (in queues, when waiting, and so on). Additionally you can try experimenting with *three-breath micro-meditations* (or other shorter or longer durations). I typically use these micro practices as I'm about to begin something new ... for example as I move into a social situation. It can make a very real difference ... see, for example "*Compassionate goals and affect in social situations*" and "*Prosocial behavior mitigates the negative effects of stress in everyday life*". **3.)** A fun thing to try is to use little stick-on paper reminder dots, mini pieces of blu tack, or other visual prompts around your environment to act as reminders to use the 3 breath practice. You don't have to stop what you're doing, but the visual prompt encourages you to shift attention for a few moments. This is described more fully in the *Autogenic Training Reminder Dot Exercise*.

I further divide the *twelve-breath practice* into *three four-breath chunks*. These are made up of brief exercises involving mindfulness, relaxation, compassion, and reappraisal. In the widely used *Bus driver metaphor*, this could be seen as a sequential focus first on *Passenger thoughts & feelings*, then on *Bus Conductor relaxation & self-compassion*, and finally on *Bus Driver redirection of attention to value-directed tasks*. **4.)** So experiment with making the first four-breath chunk a mindfulness exercise - "*How am I right now? What are the sensations & feelings in this body? What's the 'internal weather' at the moment?*" I usually do this practice sitting upright in a chair, the body erect & open as if I was doing a longer formal meditation practice. Again, on the principle that more precise intentions are often easier to follow, I go through the body breath by breath. Typically the breaths are a bit longer & fuller than my normal breathing pattern, but not dramatically so! It's perfectly possible to use this exercise in a public environment without anyone thinking that you're breathing oddly. The first breath is for awareness of the legs; second breath runs up the front of the trunk & down the arms; third breath goes up the back & neck, over the crown of the head, to the face. And the fourth breath is a kind of overview. If you would like to try a four-breath body scan as well, don't feel you have to follow my precise breath by breath sequence. Find out what feels most natural & easy for you. This first *four-breath chunk* is mindfulness. Acceptance. Holding one's state gently. Not trying to change anything – although, like sunshine on snow, awareness tends to lead to softening in the body. This is the state of this body-mind right now. With most forms of suffering ... maybe especially with the considerably-in-the-head suffering of worry & rumination ... this sinking down into the associated physical sensations can often be a good direction to go. Ed Watkins & colleagues, for example, emphasise this approach in their paper "*Guided self-help concreteness training as an intervention for major depression in primary care*".

5.) Additionally "*Naming helps taming*" ... naming a difficult experience, describing it, giving it a word label, can help to give us perspective. It helps us step back a bit from the suffering & quieten hot emotional reactions in the brain's amygdala. See the blog post "*'Naming emotions' is another useful self-regulation & mindfulness strategy*" with its description of Lieberman's research "*Subjective responses to emotional stimuli during labeling, reappraisal, and distraction*" which shows that labeling an emotional response can reduce its intensity. So sensing & naming can both help reduce suffering. I tend to name my state on the fourth breath of this initial mindful *four-breath body scan*. I do this typically using just a one or two-word label ... at maximum I might use a short descriptive phrase. Examples are "*tense*" or "*tired*" or "*bubbling*" or "*soft*". Sometimes I will consider briefly what description/label fits reasonably well, sometimes the description/label will just pop into my head. For me, the most common types of state I notice in the initial scan are forms of tension/(over)-busyness, forms of tiredness/dullness, and sometimes forms of easiness/appreciation. More on this in the next post.

So this is the initial phase of a *twelve-breath breathing space exercise*. The exercise can be done with eyes open or eyes closed; sitting, standing, lying or even while walking. Take your time. If developing an exercise like this appeals to you (and it can be very helpful), it probably makes sense to build it up in layers, gradually learning & personalising each *four-breath section*. So for a week or so, I would recommend just practising *mindfulness & naming*. Go through the described *four-breath sequence* a couple of times, making an initial *eight-breath practice*. It's likely to be helpful to keep an eye on how you're doing – use the associated record sheets. Eventually the exercise can become such a good friend, a safe haven to return to, and a secure base to approach the world from, such a precious inner place to have built & always have access to. It is a powerful way of quickly de-stressing, quieting, settling and as well it can be a hugely helpful way of coming back to who we are, reconnecting to our values, our direction, how we personally want to be & step out into the world. For the next part of this three post sequence see "*Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions: touch & affectionate releasing*".

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