**Three-Part Breathing Meditation**

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When I first began meditating many years ago, I remember feeling frustrated when a teacher would tell me to “notice your breath,” “focus on your breath” or “control your breathing.” These phrases are not always intuitive to people. And, even when they mentally make sense, not everyone has an easy time using their breath as their point of focus. Today, I’m going to take you through a three-part breathing meditation with a few subtle modifications. The purpose of this meditation today is two-fold. First, this meditation is for stress reduction, relaxation and to decrease anxiety. And second, this meditation will offer some creative tools for being able to focus on our breath. And it also explores the possibility that some people may prefer to focus on something else – such as the rise and fall of their chest as they breathe or their hand on their belly. Because not everyone prefers to meditate in the exact same way, we’re beginning to look at different options so that you can modify a practice to fit you.

Before we begin, you will notice that I reference Ocean Breathing, or Ujjayi Breathing as it is known in yoga. If you are familiar with this practice, you are welcome to incorporate it today. If you are not familiar with it, just breathe normally. We will work on Ocean Breathing another time. Also, if you feel dizzy or have trouble breathing, be sure to stop immediately and allow your breathing to return to normal.

The Process:

1. Find a quiet space where you will be undisturbed for at least ten minutes. Sit comfortably, and rest one hand on your chest and the other hand on your belly. Your eyes can be open and gazing gently in front of you, or you may choose to close your eyes. Begin by breathing as you would normally, not trying to control the breath in any way … breathing in and out through your nose. As you do so, you may notice your chest as it rises and falls with the breath … You may feel your rib cage expanding on the inhale and contracting on the exhale … Some people even hear the sound of their breath or their heartbeat … Simply observe these things as you continue to breathe … If at any time you notice that your mind has wandered on to something else, bring yourself back to this moment…

2. Now, we’re going to deepen our breathing a little bit. If you are familiar with Ujjayi or Ocean Breathing, you may want to incorporate that practice now by putting your tongue on the roof of your mouth, behind your upper teeth, and gently constricting the airflow to the back of the throat and into the belly in a controlled, but fluid way. If you are not familiar with Ocean Breath, breathe normally for a few moments more…

3. Next, begin to imagine that your belly is a balloon and as you inhale, pulling air in through your nose. Notice it flow to the back of your throat and down into your lower belly. You may feel your belly expand and your bottom hand rise with the breath. Keep inhaling into the chest and noticing that expansion in your chest. Your top hand may also rise. Keep inhaling all the way up into your throat until you cannot inhale anymore.

4. Pause your breath here, at the top of your inhale, for about 3-5 seconds.

5. Slowly exhale, first out of the throat … then your chest … then your belly. Keep exhaling until you cannot exhale anymore. Pause at the bottom of your exhale for 3-5 seconds.

6. Do this several more times. I’m going to talk for just a moment…

7. Now, for some people, it helps them focus to watch their breath. Some people can imagine this easily – the air coming into their nostrils, flowing down the back of their throat and into their belly. For others, imagery helps. For example, you might imagine your breath is a color, it doesn’t matter what color, and you’re inhaling that color in and watching it flow in and out as you breathe. Or, you may imagine that you are breathing while watching waves on the ocean, with the inhale being the crest of the wave and the exhale being the descent – whatever works for you. Last, if watching the breath is a challenge, try noticing the feeling as your hands rise and fall as your chest and belly expand and contract. For some others, it might be returning to the simple awareness of the chair or ground beneath you supporting you as you relax a little more deeply. I’m going to be quiet for a few moments more as you continue to breathe. If your mind wanders, simply return to whichever of these methods works for you – your breath, the feel of your hands on your chest and belly or the support beneath you…

8. Allow your breathing to return to normal. When you are ready, slowly open your eyes.