

[Breathing method](#)

This article is an introductory summary of the teachings of Zen Master Thích Thông Triệt on the topic, mainly based on the oral teaching of Bhikkhuni Zen Master Thích Nữ Triệt Như given for the Fundamental Meditation Course. For a comprehensive in-depth understanding, the reader is encouraged to attend the complete nine-seminar teaching program and read the writings of Master Thích Thông Triệt that are being progressively translated into English.

Origins

In the Nikāya, the breathing method is called *Ānapānasati Samādhi* which is composed of the following Pāli words: *āna* which means breath in, *pāna* which means breath out, *sati* which means awareness and *samādhi* which means stillness of mind. Taken together, the method means “achieving samādhi through awareness of breathing in, breathing out”.

The breathing method was the method used by the Buddha through the four stages of samādhi that led him to enlightenment and attaining Buddhahood. Later, the Buddha developed the method into many steps which Master Thích Thông Triệt has consolidated into five steps.

Master Thích Thông Triệt classifies the breathing method as part of samādhi meditation. He sees the essence of samādhi as wordless awareness. When the state of wordless awareness becomes steady and can last about five to ten minutes, and the state of stillness of the mind becomes stable and solid, and the awareness becomes clear and complete, we can call this state samādhi.

When we practice a technique like “relaxing the tongue” for five minutes and the mind doesn’t stay still for the entire duration but consists of some thoughts separated by periods of stillness, we would not call this state “samādhi” but “samatha”.

First step: using inner talk to stop inner dialogue

The obstacles to achieving a still mind are inner talk and inner dialogue. Among these two, inner dialogue is more difficult to control as it arises automatically. When we sit in meditation, old memories automatically spring up – they are called “images in the mind” in Buddhist terminology – and our mind follows them with emotions of sadness or joy, or makes further elaborations. This generates a back and forth silent dialogue called “inner dialogue”.

When verbal knowing is present, wordless awareness cannot be present.

The Buddha taught that the first step of the breathing method consists of saying silently “*I know I am breathing in*” when breathing in, and “*I know I am breathing out*” when breathing out. When we say silently these two sentences, we are using inner talk. When we do so, inner dialogue cannot arise, and this why this step is called “using inner talk to stop inner dialogue”.

Practice steps

We sit in the sitting meditation posture, back straight, head straight, body relaxed, spectacles removed, the two hands placed on top of each other with the thumbs touching, the arms falling down naturally, the shoulders relaxed, the knees relaxed, the whole body and mind relaxed.

We breathe in gently through the nose and gently out also through the nose, while saying silently “*I know I am breathing in*”, “*I know I am breathing out*”. The length of each sentence should coincide with the length of the breath in or out. Most important, we *maintain the awareness of “I know I am breathing in”, “I know I am breathing out”*.

If thoughts arise, it is because we forget to say the inner talk consistently. If we say silently “*I know I am breathing in*”, “*I know I am breathing out*”, there is no room for other thoughts to arise. This is the key to this practice step.

The method taught by the Buddha consists of saying silently “*I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out*” and therefore uses inner talk to stop inner dialogue. Later Zen Masters developed the method into “The marvelous six-fold method” where they identified steps for following the breath, counting the breath etc. Master Thích Thông Triệt does not recommend that we count our breath, because counting involves memory, and this activates the thinking mind which is a part of the false mind.

When we start practicing, it is inevitable that some inner dialogue still arises. We stop that by consistently saying our inner talk sentences. When inner dialogue is stopped, we have achieved this first step of “using inner talk to stop inner dialogue”

If our breath is shorter than the time we take to say silently *"I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out"*, we should say the sentences a little quicker so that the length of the sentences exactly matches the length of the breathing.

Definitions of "samādhi"

The Buddha defines samādhi as the "unified mind", or in Pāli *cetaso ekodhibhāva*, and said that *"in it (i.e. in this awareness) there is nothing else that can insert itself"*.

Master Thích Thông Triệt has defined "unified mind" more clearly as the state of wordless awareness, in which there is only the awareness and nothing else. It is immobile because it does not involve any words. If there are words, there is attachment and disturbance in the mind.

Therefore, samādhi is based on the wordless awareness mind.

There are currently some meditation methods, especially those practiced in the West, that advocate concentration on a single object, based on a literal translation of samādhi as concentration. However, when we practice meditation with a subject and concentrate on this subject, we immediately use our consciousness because a subject (or object) immediately involves differentiation. When we concentrate on the subject and focus our attention on it, we may be able to stop wandering thoughts but we also activate the sympathetic nervous system. You can try to sit in meditation and concentrate on a subject or an object for 15 minutes. You will find that you will experience tiredness and possibly headaches, these are signs of the sympathetic nervous system in action.

We must understand clearly that samādhi is based on wordless awareness. The wordless awareness mind brings with it tranquility, serenity and transformation of the mind. From there, benevolence, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity and our potential for enlightenment get developed. The right meditation practice uses wordless awareness as its foundation. This is the gate that leads to enlightenment and freedom from the cycle of births and deaths.

However, if we base our meditation on the prefrontal areas, our mind will be agitated and attached to the past, present and future, resulting in psychosomatic illnesses. This is the gate to sorrow and the endless cycle of births and deaths.

Effect of "using inner talk to stop inner dialogue"

When we practice the "using inner talk to stop inner dialogue" step, we should say the full sentences in a way that leaves no gap in which thoughts may be able to insert themselves. Thoughts have a very strong energy and can arise very quickly. When we maintain our awareness and say silently *"I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out"* we block inner dialogue from arising.

When we say words silently and maintain our awareness, we still activate our wordless awareness mind, and in particular, ultimate touch because the breath touches the membrane inside the nose. If we maintain our practice, we repeatedly stimulate ultimate touch. Ultimate touch will become active and will cause spiritual insights to emerge. This is the first effect.

After reaching ultimate touch, the stimulus gets to the hypothalamus in the midbrain, which activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which produces the neurotransmitter acetylcholine at its extremities. Acetylcholine has the capacity to regulate blood pressure and cholesterol and blood sugar levels, and to improve memory. This is the second effect.

Finally, the hypothalamus also activates the endocrine system that regulates our inner organs such as the heart, liver, lungs and stomach. This is why a correct meditation practice will alleviate psychosomatic illnesses. This is the third effect.

When we say silently *"I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out"*, these silent words get into the decoding area of the language formation chain, called Broca's area. Following that, the signal is transmitted to another area in the somatosensory cortex called the inner talk area. When we say repeatedly *"I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out"*, these words remain constantly in the inner talk area.

Another important structure of the brain is memory. Memory has a very strong energy. It has a strong tendency to spring up, leading us to recall past memories. This is called "images in the mind" in Buddhist terminology. When memory wants to emerge as words, it needs to get to Broca's area, and then, if the words are to be said silently in the mind, to the inner talk area. However, if we constantly say *"I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out"*, there is no more room in the inner talk area for any other thoughts. Therefore the images in the mind cannot find the means to arise, and inner dialogue does not arise.

We can use the Buddha's technique of "using inner talk to stop inner dialogue" in other ways. For example, when we recite "Namo Sakkhamuni Buddha", we starve inner dialogue of the space to arise. In general, when we use a sentence that we say voluntarily to stop all other wandering thoughts, we are using the "using-inner-talk-to-stop-inner-dialogue" technique.

This is a fundamental technique in meditation.

We should remember that inner talk is a single sentence that we repeat, it is not an elaborate discourse that will have the effect of agitating the mind. The key is to use a sentence that has no emotional content. In reality we could repeat a sentence that has no meaning, such as “one two three four”. However, using the “*I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out*” sentences makes it easier to maintain our awareness of the breathing.

We should also remember that “using inner talk to stop inner dialogue” is only a first step. We need to move on to other steps once we have achieved results. There are schools of Buddhism that teach solely this method. However we need to understand that staying too long on this step will only result in creating a new habit based on words without reaching the goal of reaching wordless awareness.

Second step: two-times breathing

In this step, we continue to use inner talk, but now we breathe in progressively more slowly, and breathe out twice as long as breathing in. Hence the name of two-times breathing.

The Buddha taught us to lengthen the sentences: “*I know I am breathing in l..o..n..g, I know I am breathing out l..o..n..g...a..n..d...l..o..w*”. We could practice this step by counting the in-breath and out-breath, for example counting “one.. two.. three” for the in-breath, and “one.. two.. three.. four.. five.. six” for the out-breath.

People who are accustomed to breathe out through the mouth can open their mouth slightly to let air out.

The effect of this second step is that we will lengthen our awareness as our awareness follows the inner talk sentences. Also, when we breathe slowly and deeply, we absorb more oxygen. When we practice this step regularly, we alleviate cardiovascular problems.

Although this step still involves inner talk, this inner talk has a simple, unique content that is a content of awareness “*I know I am breathing in, I know I am breathing out*”. This content does not include sorrow, sadness, conflict, blame or anger. It only has an objective content, and helps keep our mind peaceful.

The inner talk does not create suffering or sorrow and does not generate speech karma, intention karma or bodily karma.

When we practice the second step, we do not try to lengthen the breath too much as this requires exerting effort and will activate the sympathetic nervous system. We can lengthen our breath by breathing more softly. For example when we breathe out, we breathe out softly and this will lengthen the breath.

The breathing method has three more steps, which we will not cover in this Fundamental Meditation Course. These steps are:

3. Silent awareness of the breath or bare observation of the breath or breathing without inner talk and inner dialogue.
4. Awakening awareness of the breath, or “clear and full awareness” of the breath without any attachment to any emotions arising.
5. Wordless cognitive awareness of the breath, or bare cognition.

Effects of the breathing method

When we breathe, the breath touches the olfactory bulbs which are shaped like two sticks and are located inside the nose. The olfactory bulbs are linked to the nerve for smell. From there the signal is transmitted to the hypothalamus in the midbrain.

Among the five sense organs, the nose is the only one that is linked directly to the hypothalamus. The other four – the eyes, ears, tongue and skin – are linked first to a structure called the reticular formation in the brainstem. The reticular formation is often called the first relay station. Signals from the eyes, ears, tongue and skin, and from the inner organs, such as the heart, liver, lungs, intestines, stomach etc., all go through the reticular formation before being transmitted to the thalamus. In the case of sound, the signal goes through a structure called the cerebellum before reaching the thalamus. The cerebellum determines the direction of the sound and has also a role in maintaining the body’s balance.

From the thalamus, signals are sent off in many directions, in particular to the hypothalamus and to the cortex areas, including ultimate seeing, ultimate hearing and ultimate touch.

When we practice the breathing method, the stimulus goes straight to the hypothalamus and then to the thalamus for transmission to other destinations. From the thalamus, ultimate touch gets activated, which in turn activates the parasympathetic nervous system and subsequently, the endocrine system.

When we practice meditation correctly and maintain a silent and objective awareness, we activate the parasympathetic nervous system. If we practice incorrectly and use the prefrontal cortex areas to know by thinking, differentiating and comparing, the hypothalamus will express emotional states of mind such as anger, sorrow and anguish that cause the mind to become agitated. In this case, the sympathetic nervous system will become activated, resulting in disorders of inner organs and in psychosomatic illnesses.

There are many ways to keep a peaceful mind. For example, if we recite “Namo Sakkhamuni Buddha” and maintain awareness in those words and not let our mind wander to anything else, we keep our mind at peace and activate the parasympathetic nervous system. Or if we sit here in this classroom, not exerting concentration and just being aware that we are listening and learning, just keeping a simple awareness, we will also activate our wordless awareness mind. However, as soon as we exercise our consciousness, we will activate the prefrontal cortex areas.

The three aspects of knowing are subtle and not easily recognized. If we drive on a highway and just maintain awareness that we are driving a vehicle, this is awareness and not consciousness. Consciousness involves differentiating. If we start noticing the vehicles around us, their make, how the drivers look, we have activated our consciousness. Wordless awareness is instantaneous and does not involve thinking.

