

Working with Breath Including Breath Counting

Goal is to fully experience sensations of breathing.

You can let breath be natural or intentionally deepen or slow the breath.

You can breathe through nose, mouth or both.

You can work with eyes closed, opened or partially open.

Choose to focus on a small location such as nostrils or belly or chest or follow the full expanse of the breath in your body.

To start it may help to focus on the natural relaxation in the torso with the outbreath and to allow that relaxation to spread with each outbreath to soften and calm the mind-body.

Then do your best to appreciate each in breath and each out breath. Other experiences will arise—other body sensation, sounds, sights, visual or auditory thinking. Do your best to let those other experiences remain in the background and if you lose focus on the breath gently bring yourself back to your chosen focus range—sensations of breathing.

Options for helping to stay focused on the breath

You could simply say in your mind the word *IN* with each in breath or *OUT* with each outbreath.

A technique used in many traditions is the count each breath. There many ways to do that. I suggested counting each cycle of breathing --saying to yourself the number either at the beginning of the in or outbreath—whatever feels most natural for you. When you reach ten, start again with one. Some teachers suggest counting to only four or five. Other teachers suggest counting both at the start of each in breath and each out breath. In any case if you lose the count start again with one.

More options for breath counting

You could say the numbers aloud in a whisper or in a natural voice. If sitting with others you could mouth the words. This device brings into play a natural feedback loop because when you no longer hear your voice you realize that you have lost concentration. Still another option is to say the numbers in a language other than your native language.

In addition to or instead of using words you could visualize the numbers in our mind. You could even choose to visualize the Roman numerals instead of the usual Arabic numerals.

The theory here is that by saying numbers or using any other mantra you leave less space for the inevitable chatter of our minds. Imaging the numbers also tends to crowd out thinking so there is less distraction from sensations of breathing. Of course the counting itself may be a distraction from sensations of the breath but even experienced meditators often find that such tools help them overcome agitation or sleepiness. Another way to look at it is that you have expanded your focus range to cover body sensation, mental talk and mental image.