



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

Even One Deep Breath Can Make a Difference: How to Change the Channel in Your Mind

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

30 August 2020

frederickuu.org

Our lives have been disrupted in a host of different ways during this pandemic. To share one quite minor loss in the grand scheme of things, I had planned to be away for all of July on a monthlong meditation retreat that was, of course, cancelled—as has been the case with countless other carefully laid plans that so many of us had made. One of the ways I have tried to redeem that loss is by prioritizing my meditation practice the past few weeks.

During the first few months of the pandemic, I was meditating some, but the primary way I was dealing with stress was running. At the beginning of the stay-at-home order, I started running at least two miles six days a week—with a longer run on one or two of those days. It helped my mental health *a lot*. It helped me get out of my head and into my body. It helped to physically let go of what I was holding onto mentally and emotionally.

Part of why I'm bringing up exercise in a sermon about meditation is to be clear up top that meditation is not the only or best remedy for all people or situations. While meditation can be helpful for many of us, as in all things, *your mileage may vary*. And for others of you—in this particular season of your life—what may be most helpful to you is taking long walks in nature, gardening, engaging in contemplative photograph—or cooking or art or writing or prioritizing therapy appointments—or **whatever people, places, and practices make you feel freer, more liberated, more connected, grateful, energized, and fully alive.**

That being said, for those of you who are meditation curious, I do want to share with you some of how practicing meditation—even just a little bit—can help you navigate not only this pandemic, but also whatever else comes up in life. As the saying goes, **“You can’t stop the waves, but you can learn to surf.”**

And as this pandemic has continued, I’ve found myself able to settle in a little more. I’ve found myself running less and meditating more. In specific, for the past few weeks, I’ve been meditating an hour in the morning and another hour in the late afternoon on most days. In the spirit of full disclosure, I will add that I will likely be unable to sustain that level of practice after Labor Day when my other commitments are going to spike back up significantly.

Part of why I’ve been upping my meditation game is that starting in January, I’ve been invited to be part of a two-year meditation teacher training program. So while I’m very interested in what happens when you significantly increase your dosage of meditation—and how that can catapult you into some quite interesting territory—I’m also interested in how even just a little bit of meditation can make a difference.

I’m quite aware, for instance, that for those of you with young children trying to navigate online back-to-school systems, the prospect of meditating for two hours a day likely sounds like a pipe dream. Fair enough. So let me add that although it is wonderful to have the luxury of long periods of time dedicated to contemplative practice, if you don’t have time to meditate for even twenty minutes or thirty minutes a day, I really mean it when I say that ***one minute of meditation is so much better than nothing, and even one intentional deep breath counts and can catalyze an internal shift.*** Likewise, if you don’t have time to do a full yoga routine, ask yourself, **“What one yoga pose does my body most need right now?”** And stop right then to do that one pose. Even one or two stretches is so much better than nothing—and as with taking one intentional deep breath—can cause an internal shift.

Along those lines, many of you have shared with me over the years that one part of our Sunday Service that is consistently helpful to you is near the beginning when I invite us each week to take a few deep breaths *in...and out....*

When I invite you to take a deep breath and let it go, I'm inviting you to *change the channel*, so to speak, on whatever is playing in your mind. When you come to a UUCF Sunday Service—whether in person or online—a lot of things could be going on for you. You might be worried about an upcoming work deadline. You could be stewing over a conflict with a friend, colleague, or family member. You might be happy or sad or angry or otherwise occupied with any of ten thousand possible things. And when I invite you to take a deep breath *in* and *out*, I'm inviting you to loosen—even if just a little bit—around any distractions—and tune in more fully to this present moment.

It's not that all those other things—work, family, politics, etc.—aren't important. Rather, the invitation is to notice that you likely can't do too much about them right now. So don't miss what is actually here in front of you. As in the phrase Ram Dass made famous: **“Be here now.” Later, you can be there then.**

When we aren't here now—wherever we happen to be—we are usually lost in the stories of our minds. And although it's sometimes nice to daydream, those stories can also create a lot of unnecessary suffering for ourselves. Yeah, that conversation or conflict that you are dreading may well be coming, but worrying about it in advance layers on additional suffering that is actually optional—and you can choose to opt out of it and instead *be here now*. As Mark Twain said about his own tendency to make up terrible stories about his future (that may or may not end up actually being as bad as he worried they would be): **“My life has been filled with terrible misfortunes—most of which never happened.”** *Be here now. Later, you can be there then.* And maybe being more fully present right now will help you be more fully present, centered, and connected later—and thus able to respond more skillfully and compassionately—in that moment of conflict to come.

Now, here's the even more important part: you don't have to wait until Sunday morning to change the channel in your mind or heart. You can take this tool with you into the rest of your week. If you notice that your mind is stuck in a loop, playing re-runs of memories, anxieties, or fears that really aren't serving you—that you are adding *optional* suffering to your life that you would prefer to *opt out of*—pause, take a deep

breath, and let it go. Even one intentional deep breath can sometimes help you change the channel in your mind.

If you want to incline yourself further toward the specific channel you would like to tune in to, try also saying silently to yourself a mantra such as:

- “May the body relax,” “May the mind relax,”
- “May I be kind to myself and others,”
- “May I be peaceful and at ease,”
- “May I live with an open heart.”

You don’t have to use any of those phrases in particular. You can try asking yourself:

What one phrase do I most need to hear right now? What is my deepest intention?

Now, depending on what all is going on for you in any given moment, I will readily stipulate that *one deep breath* or *one short phrase* isn’t always going to do the trick of changing your channel. The good news is that there are lots of other practices you can try:

- take a short walk—even one trip around the block can help,
- spend a few moments with a pet,
- schedule some time to exercise if you can,
- get in touch with a friend.

Whatever people, places, and practices make you feel even just a little bit freer: more liberated, connected, grateful, energized, and fully alive—try those

But the thing I particularly like about the breath is that whereas we don’t always have time or ability to take a walk, spend time with a pet, or get in touch with a friend, our breath is always with us—in literally every moment. So let me give you three quick tricks along those lines. The first is that, since so many of us spend so much time in front of computer screens these days, you can google the words “breathing exercise” for a free, silent one-minute guided breathing meditation:

- When you click on the play symbol (▶), the app will first invite you to pay attention to your breath.
- You’ll see the circle begin to contract, inviting you to start with a full exhale as you bring your attention to your breath.

- Then as the circle *expands*, you are invited to “breathe in.”
- And when the circle *contracts*, you are invited to “breath out.”

In a few moments, we’ll try it together for one minute. If it feels okay to you, try closing your mouth, and breathing in and out through your nose.

Scientific studies have found that breathing in and out through your nose—instead of through your mouth—is preferable for a host of reasons. And you’ll notice that this breathing app is similarly designed, based on scientific studies, to slow down our breathing to approximately 5.5 seconds each for both the inhale and exhale (Nestor 212). ***Let’s try it together, starting with a full exhale as you bring your attention to your breath.***

During that one-minute breathing exercise, did you find yourself breathing in a little more deeply than you normally do—and breathing out a little more fully? As with your breath—which is with you wherever you go—that breathing exercise is silent and available to you anytime you are connected to the Internet. With or without Google, the next time you are feeling stressed, try taking five deep breaths over the course of a minute. Breathing in for ~5 seconds and out for ~5 seconds. See if that helps internally change your channel.

A second trick along those lines, called **box breathing**, has become renowned because Navy SEALs use it as a calming technique in highly stressful situations. It’s called box breathing because the key thing to remember is the number 4, as in the four sides of a box.

For “box breathing,” there are four things to do, and you do them all for four seconds each:

1. Inhale for 4 seconds
2. Hold it for 4 seconds
3. Exhale for 4 seconds
4. Hold it for 4 seconds

And repeat.

A slightly more advanced technique from Dr. Andrew Weil is 4-7-8 Breathing, which is especially helpful if you are having trouble falling asleep:

First, exhale completely through your mouth.

- Close your mouth and **inhale** quietly through your nose to a mental count of 4.
- **Hold** for a count of 7.
- **Exhale** completely through your mouth, with a whoosh, to a count of 8.

Repeat this cycle for at least four breaths.

Again, as with all things, your mileage may vary on whether this works for you or not. But it may be worth giving it a shot. Depending on your time and interest, this is barely scratching the surface about what science is discovering about breathing. If you are interested in learning more, I recommend journalist James Nestor’s fascinating book [Breath: The New Science of a Lost Art](#).

Now, having mentioned Dr. Weil’s 4-7-8 breathing technique as a way of getting to sleep, I should hasten to add in this sermon on meditation that one of the most common problems new meditators report is that they fall asleep when meditating. And part of what I tell folks is that the most important takeaway may be that if you are falling asleep while meditating, what might be most beneficial to you is *taking a nap* instead of trying to force yourself to stay awake to meditate—and/or getting more sleep generally to the extent that is available to you. In all seriousness, for many people, **the first step in establishing a meditation practice is prioritizing sleep, so that you can meditate more easily without becoming sleepy.**

Here’s the thing: many meditation practices are trying to cultivate a kind of “third” way of being in the world that is both relaxed *and* alert. I’ve heard the meditation teacher Michael Taft talk about four possible quadrants, but I’ve never seen it made into a visual aid, so I’ve put that together in case it helps some of you:

	<u>Relaxed</u>	<u>Alert</u>
<u>Relaxed</u>	Asleep (or zoned out)	Meditation (“loving awareness”)
<u>Alert</u>	“Grinding teeth while asleep”	Stressed out (multitasking)

The world today often has many of us in one of two gears: we’re either *awake and alert* (stressed out, feeling pulled in a thousand directions, and multitasking) or we’re at the other end of the spectrum: relaxed but so tired that we’re zoned out or

asleep. The truly perverse thing is that even when we do rest, many of us find ourselves not in the third state of “relaxed and alert” in the meditation sense, but rather still *alert* while we’re trying to relax. One among many examples would be if a dentist has ever told you that you have signs of grinding your teeth in your sleep due to stress.

In contrast, many meditation practices are inviting us to be *relaxed and alert* in an open, gentle, compassionate sense that is sometimes called “loving awareness.” Thoughts, emotions, body sensation will arise. We’re aware of whatever arises, but without grasping or clinging. Just “letting be”—letting whatever arises arise, then allowing it to float down the river of our consciousness, or drift along like clouds in the vast, open sky. As a saying from the Zen tradition puts it, **“Leave your front door and your back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea.”**

A somewhat surprising key to waking up—in the sense of “enlightenment”—really is *relaxing*: relaxing your body, relaxing your mind, relaxing your expectations of what you think meditation is supposed to be like. And there is often an inverse correlation between wanting particular meditation experiences to happen and having them happen. Instead, just *be here now* and open yourself to what meditation is actually like. And allow whatever experiences are going to arise do so in their own good time.

Now, there is so much more I’d like to tell you about meditation, but for now I’ll say that if you are interested in the nerdy neuroscience side of the benefits that meditation can bring, one recent accessible book is *Neurodharma* by the neuroscientist and meditation teacher Rick Hanson. Or, if you are seeking support in sustaining a daily practice, a good starting point might be the Ten Percent Happier app. There are also lots of opportunities right there on our homepage (frederickuu.org) to practice meditation and yoga multiple times each week with other members of this congregation.