

Wording: An Alternative Anchor

By Nicholas Stein

In our meditation practice we often rely on a singular object of attention, a particular point of focus, in order to help quiet the mind. A corner stone of nearly all contemplative traditions, these “anchors” allow for a separation from, and an observing of, the endless cascade of thoughts that make up the human condition.

The classic, and most taught, technique is, of course, the use of the breath - and for many sound reasons. Portable, natural, indispensable and life giving, concentrating on the breath automatically links mind to body. In a practice that asks you to, “Be here now,” there’s nothing more present than the breath you’re taking right now. As one of my teachers quipped, “Breathing; it’s almost as if your life depended on it!”

The unadorned truth is, the totality of our earthly experience is sandwiched between two monumental events - our first and our last breaths. How ironic, then, that we should take breathing for granted as much as we do; all we need do is ask an asthmatic – or any other breathing challenged person - if the breath is worthy of both noticing and cherishing; for them the question will sound painfully obvious.

I have an amazing mindfulness teacher (Jerome Front) who offers a brilliant 40-minute dissertation - in the form of a guided meditation - that examines every exquisite and nuanced aspect of a single breath. Beginning at the edge of our nostrils, the journey leads, step by step, through the nose cavity, past and down the back of the throat, leading to the movement of our diaphragm and the rising of the belly - and that’s just the inhalation. Observing all this at a granular level, it’s like using a microscope to look at your fingerprint; suddenly you’re seeing ridges that rival the Great Wall of China!

The great Vietnamese Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, gives this gentle instruction; to silently remind ourselves in sitting or walking meditation, “Breathing in, I know am breathing in. Breathing out I know am breathing in out.” He’s asking us to be mindful of the very thing that helps us to be mindful.

The word breath is a noun and the word breathing an adverb. I bring this up because of the title of this essay. In the dictionary, the word, “Wording” is also a noun, meaning, “The words used to express something; the way in which something is expressed.” I am now attempting to turn this word into an adverb, making “Wording” something you do!

It’s an alternative meditation technique I am using to significantly enhance my concentration levels during meditation. I’m adding this to a list of the existing concentration techniques that are taught by so many of our teachers. They range from using the breath to identifying bodily sensations; all to help bring us back to the present moment.

One popular approach is called labeling, or noting. It’s used to help us identify the different types of mind wanderings so prevalent when we sit to go within. As we meditate, using noting, we can say to ourselves, “Thinking”, or “Planning”, or “Worrying” or even “Wandering.” This helps trigger the, “Muscle of Mindfulness” (using a ubiquitous mental gym metaphor), allowing us to then return to the anchor, which is, most often, is the breath.

Meditation is a deeply personal exercise and we’re all encouraged to use the technique(s) that works best for us. We certainly all need the help, especially as we transition from our waking “autopilot” modality into a contemplative state. Help to quiet the mind, leading to a deeper state and an awareness of our awareness; yes please.

I have adopted this alternative anchor, Wording, because, for me, concentrating primarily on the breath; using it as my # 1 anchor was, frankly, not enough to tame my monkey mind, particularly, for a longer sit.

So I invite you to add the word Wording (described in detail below) to the list of mindfulness concentration tools; a list that includes Breathing and Labeling (also called Noting), and Counting, as well as using attention to Sounds and Body Sensations.

So, what exactly is Wording and how do you do it? When I began experimenting with this approach, I did not realize that it’s akin to

an established and ancient technique often used in Christian contemplation. According to Bhante Gunaratana, the great writer about mindfulness, "Contemplation is a prolonged period of conscious thought about a specific topic, usually a religious ideal or a scriptural passage. From the standpoint of mental cultivation, this is an exercise in concentration. The normal deluge of conscious thought is restricted, and the mind is brought to one conscious area of operation. The results are those you find in any concentrative practice; deep calm, a physiological slowing of the metabolism and a sense of peace and well being."

In my adaptation to this type of contemplation, Wording, as the name implies, also uses words, but it is not a mantra. Wording uses only a small number of words; words that, to be effective, *need* to be simple, and flexible, because they will be repeated. These words are chosen for their ability to have myriad and subtle "meanings"; as they will be examined, "sliced and diced" and layered.

Like Christian contemplation, Wording can employ a simple "religious" phrase, but, in my version, that phrase is then deconstructed and its component parts, its individual words, are broken out and repeated; plumbed for deeper meaning.

Yes, it is an active technique, and yes, it does induce *some* thinking, but the thoughts will be simple and should not induce mental spinning or "story telling". They are designed to induce a deeper level of concentration. Here's an example, and the phrase I use the most. It's called The Equanimity Prayer and it's Buddhist in origin. It's really a simple affirmation that says, "*This is How it is Now.*"

The beauty of this phrase, in its wholeness, is its ability to help us accept reality; reality as it is. It asks us to see how things really are - in that moment - and to expand our comfort zone to be okay with what is.

This call for equanimity has helped me stop tilting at the windmills of desire and is a version more effective than almost any other technique I've tried or heard of. But with Wording, we don't stop there. This method breaks down the equanimity prayer; word by word, starting with the first word, "This."

What I do, after an initial period that establishes the breath as a foundation, I simply say the word "This" - over and over, slowly and silently - until the statement (This!), becomes a question (This?). "This" then naturally morphs into a more pronounced inquiry. "This what?", and the answers come, organically, all on their own. "This breath; this moment; this chair; this house; this feeling; this pain in my foot; this heartache; this smile," - and on it goes.

The underlying inquiry is "What is *this* reality?" - this *present moment* reality - not *that* one from the past...or *that* one in my future. After some time inquiring what "This" might mean to us, we move onto the next word in the prayer, which is "Is". Now we say, "This is," - and, again, the question arises, "This is *what*? The answers, "This is real; this is difficult; this is my life; this is hot, cold, boring, intense.... this is, is, is", and you let it flow onward. Here's a grid to see how it might go.

Equanimity Phrase: This is how it is right now...			
This. This what? This breath? This moment? This now? This chair; house; feeling; pain in my foot; heartache; smile...	This is. This is what? This is now. This is real. This is difficult. This is my life. This is hot, cold, boring, intense...	This is the way it is. How is it? What is it? It's what? It's here, now, living, life, awareness; consciousness.	This is the way it is right <i>now</i> . When? Now! Here and now. And now and now...

So that's the basic idea but I urge you to find a few words, or a phrase, that *you* think would work for you. For instance, I've also experimented with the famous "Five W's," that I was taught in a high-school journalism class. You may know it; the W's are: Who, When, Where, What and Why - questions that should all be answered in the first paragraph of a good news story.

Used here in mediation practice, they provoke some very interesting responses. When? (Now!), Where? (Here!), Who? (Me!), What? (Awareness!) and Why? (Darn good question!).

Please, do not take my word for this concentration technique; take it

for a test drive and see if you find yourself both calmer and more alert – and especially alert to the questions relating to your human existence, as this is always where the real insights tend to be.

Use the Equanimity Prayer, which remains my go-to technique, as it combines acceptance with inquiry; allowing with probing. When sitting, using it makes for a deeper dive, as the process asks you to relax while meditating on some of the most fundamental issues there are, all the while not *over* thinking it; just letting the profundity of the questions wash over you. And because you are doing this in conjunction with breathing, you'll feel its' good effects both in the mind and the body.

Wording, it's not just a noun anymore...

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