

# **upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation: touch & affectionate releasing**

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*If you want to others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.*  
Dalai Lama

I recently wrote a blog post "*Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions (1st post): mindfulness & naming*" where I commented that if the thousands of recent research papers on mindfulness, emotion regulation & related subjects couldn't help us improve on the helpfulness of brief meditation practices, then science hasn't been doing its job adequately. I went on to describe five possible upgrades saying that, if you're interested in trying out these ideas, maybe just explore a few at a time. In this post I mention a further four upgrade options. As with the first five suggestions, build up step by step, experimenting with what works well for you personally.

In the last post I mentioned a possible *twelve-breath breathing space sequence*. I went on to discuss the first *four-breath chunk* of the sequence, which involves *mindfulness & naming*. I said that typically for me, I find the internal state I name usually falls into one of three general types - forms of tension/(over)-busyness, forms of tiredness/dullness and sometimes forms of easiness/appreciation. The same is likely to be true for you, that as you use the *twelve-breath exercise* on a number of occasions, you notice that certain internal states quite often recur. The internal state we name can somewhat affect how we use the next *four-breath chunk* of the *twelve-breath sequence*.

The second *four-breath chunk* of this upgraded breathing space exercise involves touch & self-compassion. Read through the companion blog post "*Self-compassion: soothing touch helps us settle and relax*".

**6.)** Does touch help to settle you? If so, what kinds of touch? Try gently using one of these personally appreciated forms of touch now. **7.)** Note too my comments "*Does adding your name or caring/encouraging words give additional benefits? In loving relationships that you experienced maybe as a child or more recently, have there been forms of endearment, particular words, particular pet names or diminutives that have been touching, soothing, settling for you? Try them out. Does adding a word, a phrase, or a sentence or two add something helpful and extra to the experience of using soothing touch?*" Maybe try using these kind words now. *Talking to ourselves* like this can help us step back and get more perspective ... see "*Self-talk as a regulatory mechanism: how you do it matters*" and even "*Compassion at the mirror: exposure to a mirror increases the efficacy of a self-compassion manipulation*"! And we may talk to ourselves, and we can also try imagining others talking to us, hear their voices, imagine them reaching out to us ... maybe someone we know who has particularly loved us, or maybe someone we respect who we know cares about us, an attachment figure, maybe even a religious figure, or a light, a symbol. Experiment again, what works for you? See, as an example, this personal description in the blog "*Kidney donation: preoperative preparation & facing challenges generally - aspects of self-compassion*".

**8.)** Use *four breaths first* for the soothing touch and then to scan through the body in the same progression as before. So the first breath of this second *four-breath sequence* involves soothing touch & kind, encouraging words mentioned above. Then breaths two to four of this second sequence take us through the body as before. For me this means legs, then front of body & arms, then up the back & neck over the head to the face. This time though explore how helpful it is to respond to the internal state you named. If, as is often the case, my internal state is a bit *tense/(over)-busy*, I note any areas of holding or tightness as I scan through the different body areas. I internally acknowledge that I don't have to go on tensing just now. I can give myself a break, soften, let these areas melt. Not so much "*doing*" something to myself, as "*undoing*". The breath can be used to help this process. Noting areas of holding on the inbreath. Softening, releasing, unwinding, on the outbreath. Gentle. Kind. If it feels helpful, silently using soothing, settling words. For example, I might internally say something to myself like "*OK, dear James, soften now. Let go now. Easy. Gently. Releasing. Softening more. Melting & relaxing.*" In all the publicity about the value of mindfulness, we can forget the great usefulness of self-compassion and relaxation. As I've underlined in the blog posts "*Generalized anxiety disorder: should applied relaxation be the first line psychological treatment?*" and "*New NICE guidance on the treatment of generalized anxiety*

*disorder*", it is applied relaxation not mindfulness that is currently the evidence-based recommendation for treatment of general anxiety & tension.

If however the basic state I named has more of a tiredness/dullness quality, then with the second four-breath scan I imagine bathing, cleansing the body with light & energy, washing out the tiredness/dullness, recharging my batteries, my body-mind state. Again, I will also use soothing touch and internally talk silently & encouragingly to myself. So important to realise that we have this huge capacity to recharge our batteries & move forward again ... see, for example, *"Implicit theories about willpower predict subjective well-being"*, and *"Persevering with positivity and purpose: An examination of purpose commitment and positive affect as predictors of grit"*. This linking to personal purpose & values will spread into the third four-breath chunk of this breathing space exercise.

**9.)** The third possible state that I personally occasionally find myself in when I note my internal weather with the first *four-breath scan*, is one of happiness, contentment, wellbeing. I may find that I'm not particularly tense, or particularly tired ... I'm feeling pretty good, alive, well. Again I'll use an initial gentle touch, but the second four-breath scan now moves through the body with appreciation, savouring, being present with gratitude. So good to be alive, to be in the body, grateful & blessed. It's a bit like a cat sitting in sunlight. Allowing the goodness to soak through body & mind. Wonderful. Repeatedly often simply returning to allowing a sense of light & gratitude to spread & deepen as I move through the scan. There seems real value in treating welcome, delicious, pleasant experiences differently from less welcome, distressing experiences. As the paper *"The relationship between self-distancing and the duration of negative and positive emotional experiences in daily life"* highlights, self-distancing perspective-taking tends to drain the emotional colour/intensity out of experiences. This can be welcome when dealing with distress, but is likely to be an unhelpful side-effect when dealing with welcomed emotional states. I wrote about the importance of being able to really appreciate good times some years ago - see *"Savouring - initial thoughts"* and *"Savouring, mindfulness & flow"*. B. B. King makes the same point with his version of *"Let the good times roll!"* Subsequent research has further underlined the importance of nourishing this ability to appreciate life across the life cycle and across psychological states ... see, for example *"Savoring, resilience, and psychological well-being in older adults"*, *"Cherish the good times: relational savoring in parents of infants and toddlers"* & *"An investigation of the relationship between positive affect regulation and depression"*.

Well done for getting this far in your exploration of this *twelve-breath practice*. I've made a series of suggestions for the second *four-breath phase* of the exercise. You don't have to incorporate all these ideas. Explore. Start more simply and add layers to the practice if you personally find additional ideas/suggestions helpful. Use the record sheet to monitor what works best for you. This is all about you constructing an inner place that you can return to that can be a hugely helpful resource. There are parallels with Marcus Aurelius's *"Inner citadel"*. It takes time and practice - see for example, *"Automatic control of negative emotions: evidence that structured practice increases the efficiency of emotion regulation"* and *"Getting over it: long-lasting effects of emotion regulation on amygdala response"*. It can very much be worth it. Now see *"Upgrading the 'breathing space' meditation, some research-based suggestions (3rd post): embodied values & moving on"* for the next post in this sequence.

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