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A Borderless Life

When I was a boy, I often lost my breath if it was windy. I had the feeling of drowning in air.

Until my late teens, I was often afraid of suffocating, that is, not having enough space to breathe freely and unlimited. All that changed one particular day, when I met a person in a prison who taught me about meditation. My anxiety vaporised like the damp on a mirror after a hot shower.

Breathing has always played a key role in meditation practice. It is a simple but effective way of connecting yourself to the present moment.

Most introductions to meditation begin by focusing on breathing — typically for no more than two or three minutes, several times a day. I was an inmate for twenty days, which gave me some time to practice. Time and place was right. During those days, I experienced how my span of attention could be lengthened gradually. My focus moved away from breathing and around into my body or out in the world around me. Widening my attention.

In between my daily tasks such as fixing towel heaters, training and reading compulsively, I meditated. I noticed that breathing is mobile. It changes just like life. For the same reason, meditation is not about relaxing, but about concentrating and sharpening your attention. Instead of staring at a spot on the tablecloth, or the tattoos on the guy in front of you, breathing can be helpful to fix your attention on something that is always present but never stationary. It can be reminiscent of the dynamic balancing act of trying to make your life worth life.

An inhalation followed by an exhalation. An exhalation followed by an inhalation. An exhalation ... The simplicity suited my life at that time. Breathing has its own life. It's a question of rhythm. The word *rhythmos* in Greek means 'wave-like movement'. The ancient Greeks placed emphasis on the last part of the word: movement, progress or flow. Almost as old, the ancient Romans stressed the wave, the moment or peak that is repeated. Some people count their inhalations and exhalations, others count the hours

before meeting their sweetheart. Most people enjoy celebrating the number of years they have lived with an annual birthday party. But an overly rigid and addictive approach to measuring life (e.g. counting followers or Likes on social media) can also spoil life's more narrative flow.

No one breath is identical to the one before or the one after. When each breathe is a unique, the breathings of all living beings create a mixture of simultaneous voices; a polyphony as the literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin said.

As a schoolboy in Denmark, I used to pretend I was a cool cowboy who smoked. As my fictional cigarette, I would tear off and roll up a piece of paper from my notebook that I then puffed away on. The cold air meant that I could see my own breath. And even more importantly back then: perhaps other people thought I was really smoking!

Most of us have probably blown on our sunglasses to clean them. But imagine now that the glass does not fog up. How can you be certain that you are actually breathing rather than just having a battery in your neck?

I thought about that, while being inside. I didn't want to continue being afraid and angry. And I didn't want to live my life fighting with it. I wanted to participate. To write. Breathe it all in—the good and the bad. However, unlike Buddhist's, I don't believe life is suffering per se; it is, but is also full of joy, kindness, and love.

Breathing is a way to learn about immortality and fellowship. Every breath is fragile, because it is dependent on oxygen. Very few people can breathe for long on the top of Mount Everest. Most mountaineers have to be helped with oxygen. Without oxygen, no one can kiss or make love. Without oxygen, no one can eat an organic salad or enjoy a juicy hamburger.

Breathing also activates basic gratitude for the same reason. It teaches us to be generous, since no one can hold his or her breath forever — not if you want to keep living at any rate. Breathing clarifies that we are connected. Breath, wind, weather... where does it come from and where is it going?

Breathing in a prison is no different than from breathing elsewhere.

Inside versus outside, man versus women, old versus young, thin versus fat, black versus fat ... all these dichotomies comes from a closed mindset. Today's identity politics repeats itself as a way of clinging on to its own egoistic prejudices, whereas our breathe reminds us that the most fundament in life is different, strange and weird.

Breathing promotes humility—at least that was my experience—because we learn that even if we do not know where it is coming from and where it is going, breath will always come again. Humility is also connected to an awareness that — to a certain extent — I can control my breathing, but that sometimes it takes over automatically. If I faint, that doesn't mean that my body will stop breathing.

Breathing is a reality check. If a woman or man causes me to lose my breath, it could be because I am hit by their beauty—mentally or physically. If I start to hyperventilate every time I am in a certain situation, or with certain people, I can try to minimise such situations, or at least prepare myself mentally.

Unlike what some might claim, breathing doesn't have to be an navel-gazing activity undertaken from a pillow in your local Buddhist *sangha*. The attentiveness you train through the practice of meditation can clearly indicate when enough is enough. It can help you act responsible in society. Explicitly say no to abuse, oppression, greed, violation, and hate. Paying attention to life can help establish the bond or faith between all human beings and this one world. This particular bond is something, I believe, we have lost.

Breathing is the witness to the fact that I do not own life; it comes and goes. Life passes by me like the wind that passes through my living room when I am airing out the house. Breathing is formed and unformed, recreated and uncreated. It is and it isn't. Breathing is constant. It opens us up to an awareness of a metaphysical process or change in which nothing lasts forever. There are no guarantees here in life, apart from knowing that one day it will end.

Still, and this might be the place to say *hold your breathe*. What holds life together is not breathing, but something even more fundamental: love. Love is what makes life worth breathing. As the philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said: “Loving people is the only thing worth living for.”

Then, what’s the point of all this breathing. First, it keeps us alive; second by breathing consciously we can become more attentive. “Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object”, writes the philosopher Simone Weil in *Waiting for God*. In order to receive life—which always comes from the outside—“our thought should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive the object in its naked truth.” Paying attention is a practice of waiting to receive what is happening, without judging what is happening *beforehand*. If you just pay attention to what you need or hope for, you are actually not yet ready to be penetrated by life. For that reason, it was very illustrative that I learned about meditation in a prison, and not at the local Buddhist center.

Later in life, I came to the conclusion that although meditation can help cultivate our capacity to live more attentive, being more alert, it doesn’t tell us what to do in life. Instead it is a way of enhancing the space in-between what affects us and how we might respond in a more wisely fashion. To avoid any kind of spiritual automation, I think that attention have to be combined with critical thinking. In that way it becomes ethical, that is, a form of life that tries to be worthy of living with what takes place, how the world affects us. The combination of attention and critical thinking leads to a more curious explorative and experimenting form of life. What is happening? What is also possible? How can I also relate to what takes place?

Such kind of hyper-attentiveness makes things appear clearer, almost as if they happened in slow-motion. I have sometimes realised that I was on the verge of overreacting, doing something stupid, just as I have also recognised when I would have to draw a line in the sand—right here and now. I truly believe it is better to be honest than polite, which does not mean you should not treat people with respect; rather that if you are too polite to be honest, then you are not really living your life. Too be honest, it was

politeness that brought me to prison, not honesty. I was too well-behaved to say, “I don’t want to play tough.”

With honesty comes the tears, and the laughter. Both are characterized by how one can lose his or her breath.

Breathing, therefore, is more than respiration. It is a lifeline. It is my connection to life and everyone else. Yet, conscious breathing is not a panacea for ethics; solely a powerful way of training our attention—not as a resource, but—as what constitutes experiences. Attention is love; attention is the key.

I used attention to unlock myself from prison and take a step into a borderless life. Full of love.