

Two-Count Breathing for the Distracted Mind

By Peter B. Williams

When the mind is particularly distracted in meditation, it is helpful to be aware of the breath in a structured way.

Begin with noticing the sensations of breathing in the belly. As soon as you have noticed any part of an in or out breath, make a mental count of "one" (an in or out breath is half a breath, the two combined are a full breath). When you have noticed any part of the next full breath, count "two."

Once you have reached a count of two, move your attention to the chest and repeat the process. Keep your attention with the rise and fall of the chest until you have noticed two consecutive full breaths. Then move to the nostrils and repeat the process. Stay here until you have reached a count of two and move back to the belly. Continue cycling from belly to chest to nostrils.

You can apply all the regular principles of wise effort within this two-count framework: balancing relaxation

and precision in a half-breath focus, celebrating when you realize you have been distracted, and then simply returning without further comment (See "How to Meditate 6: The Essential Role of Wise Effort in Meditation" on my "Essays" page).

When the mind is more settled you might find it helpful to stay in each location until you reach a count of three.

This approach provides structure without keeping a tally of the breaths you have noticed, as some breath-counting approaches do. Keeping score all too easily slides into a judgmental framework of "good meditator/bad meditator" that ultimately backfires as a motivation strategy.

Once the mind has become more focused, drop the counting and stay with the simple principles of wise effort. It is wise not rely on the counting method as your normal approach to mindfulness because, over time, this can subtly tilt your motivation towards striving.