

Sutras

Sutras are verses from discourses, often used for meditation. In class we use several exercises related to the the Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing from the book *Breathe, you are alive!* by Thich Nhat Hanh. In it, he describes 16 of these exercises, and links them to the breath. They are recited at a slow pace or repeated inwardly.

Sutras develop the ability to concentrate and enable a deep awareness.¹

In the classroom we covered the following exercises:

“Breathing in, I calm my whole body. Breathing out, I calm my whole body.”²

“Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.”³

These exercises are easy to put into practice. They don’t take much time, and they can be used almost anywhere.

The more deeply we observe, the greater our mental concentration becomes. Stopping and collecting our mind, we naturally become able to see.

Thich Nhat Hanh

In 2018, during a 7:00 a.m. early morning interview by the Bavarian Television at Munich’s Central Station, I was asked if I was also able to meditate standing in the station hall amongst people passing by, with the incoming trains. They thought it would make a great starting scene; they’d let the camera run and then after a short time approach me to begin the interview. I agreed, briefly considering which technique I could best use to keep my focus. The exercise related to Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing came to mind. So I quietly repeated to myself, “Breathing in, I liberate my mind. Breathing out, I liberate my mind.” It worked.

Unfortunately, we had to repeat the scene three times. First the sound wasn’t working and twice too many people passed between the camera and me. By the third attempt, my perception had changed. Everything had more intensity and I could see everything much more clearly and more in focus. I suddenly noticed the pigeons in the hall, closely watching how they landed. I observed that they always needed a very long braking distance when landing because the floor there is very slippery. Although I frequently visit Munich Central Station, I’ve never noticed this before. This exercise had significantly increased my awareness of the present moment.

In class, we sometimes use the another exercise:

“Breathing in, I observe letting go. Breathing out, I observe letting go.”⁴

If you repeat this sentence often, you’ll notice that the meaning of the words intensifies. The expression “letting go” has many facets. I can let go of superfluous possessions, which is fairly easy. I can also let go of things that at first I don’t want to let go of, but circumstances force me to. Or it may even be that I lose someone, for example because a relationship ends or someone dies. And last but not least, I can let go of my thought patterns and conditioning.

Afterwards, in class, we discuss our experiences with the exercises.

My students have also developed their own variations, for example: “I breathe in and know that I am valued. I breathe out and know that I am valued.”

Primary literature used for the lessons

Thich Nhat Hanh (2008). *Breathe, you are alive! The Sutra on the Full Awareness of Breathing*. Berkeley: Parallax Press.

¹ Cf. Thich Nhat Hanh 2008, p. 105.

² Thich Nhat Hanh 2008, p. 12 and p. 53 ff.

³ Thich Nhat Hanh 2008, p. 13 and p. 65 ff.

⁴ Thich Nhat Hanh 2008, p. 13 and p. 83 ff.

Journal Notes

Sutras

A. U.

Friday, 12/18/15

When: approx. 6:30 p.m.

What: Sutra Meditation

Where: In the car and while shopping

Today it was already incredibly stressful in the morning and I hurried with everything so that I would be ready at 6 pm, because we were invited to a birthday party. I managed to be ready on time, but I was the only one ready. So I had to wait until we could leave. As it was now foreseeable that we would leave [the house] at least one hour later than planned, I decided to go out on a quick shopping errand. While I could still do something useful, I was incredibly angry. This was because I had been rushing all day and because I hate being late. After nothing helped, I tried the sutra “my mind is calm and peaceful” and said it to myself continuously, making the effort to breathe consciously. It took me at least half an hour to get really calm, but I had time!

C. W.

Thursday, 5/9/19

Body calm and peaceful, mind calm and peaceful

5:30 p.m. about 10-15 minutes, at the dentist

Since I am agitated and somewhat anxious at the dentist [office] and an examination for a procedure with an injection is imminent, I used the time in the waiting room and on the treatment chair to calm myself down with the breathing technique. First, I spent several minutes calming my body while breathing in and out. Afterwards my mind. In the beginning it was very difficult because I always had pictures of syringes etc. in front of me and while waiting in the treatment chair I saw the tools lying there. But with time it got better. I was able to concentrate on my breath with a lot of effort and ignore the vortex of thoughts. I was still insecure, but much less so. Especially since the actual treatment will be in half a year. I will meditate for sure before that!

J. H.

Where: at home

What: sutras

How long: 10 min

I wanted to try the sutras again – this time a roommate read the sentences aloud to me and I repeated them in my head. At the beginning, she thought it rather strange, but at the end she said she noticed that she felt a bit calmer. At first you only read the sentences over, but if you read them really attentively, they take on a different meaning.

When: 5/25/17

What: sutras / breathing

How long: in total approx. 20 min

Today I tried the sutras. At first I meditated for about 10-15 minutes and then I read numbers 3 – 6 aloud a couple of times. To be honest, I found it a little easier in class, because there the sentences were read aloud to us. This time, I had to open my eyes again and again to be able to read. Maybe that's why it's better to have the sentences read aloud to you. Nevertheless, I liked the way it felt and can imagine repeating it more frequently.

M. L.

5/19/16

Today we discussed the sutras in the classroom. Already on the journey home they proved to be very helpful. When another driver pulled out right in front of me, I immediately remembered: “I breathe in and let my mind become calm and peaceful. I breathe out and let my mind become calm and peaceful.” And indeed, I felt the fear of a [potential] accident and the anger towards the driver fade away.

6/15/16

In between all the stress for the upcoming exams, there's an exercise that I use pretty much every day: the sutras! I always feel quite a bit calmer afterwards. I can concentrate completely on myself and my breathing.

N. H.

11/18/15

Duration: 2 min

Time: 7:30 a.m.

Place: car

I was on my way to work. I drove my car today and of course I was stuck in a traffic jam during rush hour. I should be there at 8:00 a.m. The arrival time on my GPS was already after 8! I felt myself becoming impatient and grumpy. I knew I wouldn't make it on time, at 8:00 a.m! So, I tried to calm down a little bit. I said aloud the sentence: "I breathe in and let my body become calm and peaceful" 3 times loudly and slowly [...] and breathed in rhythm with it. That helped me to calm down a little bit. I had come to terms with the fact that I would be late. But through meditation I managed to arrive at work in a good mood.

Time: 2:00 p.m.

Duration: 5 min

Place: S-bahn [commuter train]

Type of meditation: sutra

How did it go?

I was on my way home from university and I was going "a hundred and eighty" because I was running from lecturer to lecturer for my internship. Everyone said something different and everyone seemed overwhelmed by the situation. I think I myself was the most overwhelmed, because I just don't know where I'm going to go now. On the s-bahn, I closed my eyes and thought of the following sentence: "I breathe in and let my mind become calm and peaceful, I breathe out ...".

That helped me tremendously to calm down. I saw everything in a more relaxed way after that. Everyone is overwhelmed by this internship situation, not only me!

