

## Sensorial Original Lesson: Observing your breath

Montessori Institute of Teacher Education  
2015-2017 Early Childhood/Primary  
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Age: 5 to 105 years

### Developmental Aims:

To isolate one sense with focus. To calm the body and the mind. To emotionally regulate. To deescalate conflict. Dovetails nicely with peace curriculum and practical life (skills).

### Practical aims:

To observe the sensation of one's breath as it exists the nostrils and lands above the upper lip, and later observe sensations throughout the whole body.

### Materials:

Your very own self, perhaps a comfy pillow or blanket. Access to darkness (with a nightlight, of course.)

Preparation:

The silent game, experience with great works that require concentration over a period of time, sitting still for 10-45 minutes at a time without speaking or moving the body much. Body-part vocabulary. A talk about “Not yucking anyone’s yum” or “If you have nothing nice to say, don’t say anything at all” or something to that effect.

Presentation:

1. Invite the child to watch the presentation of “Observing my breath”.
2. Dim the lights in the room to create a conducive ambiance. Remove other potentially distracting stimuli if you can, like have the whole class do this together in silence during circle time.
3. Place yourself in a comfortable seated position on the floor, perhaps with a pillow or blanket beneath your posterior and a blanket on your lap.
4. Instruct the child(ren) to close their eyes and model it yourself. Ask them if they will play a game with you wherein they listen to their breath as it exits their nostrils. Tell them that in order to play this game they must please keep their sounds inside and to try to control their bodies for as long as they possibly can.
5. Breathe loudly from your nostrils with your mouth closed and ask that the children do the same for three breaths. Then ask if they were able to feel the breath exiting their nostrils and landing above their upper lips. Tell them that area is called the “Philtrum”.
6. Ask them to do this for at least another 10 breaths. Count the first few out loud (but quietly) with them, getting increasingly quieter with each count.
7. See how long they can do it.
8. When the first child starts moving, ask them to please direct their attention to the top of their heads and tell them to look with their eyes closed using their invisible eye above their nose to observe sensations there.
9. Ask some questions like “Is it itchy up there? Tingly up there? Does it hurt? Is it hot? Can you feel a breeze?” but specify that they should keep their answers inside and to observe the sensation for a fleeting moment before moving onto the next part. Ask them to try not to “judge” any sensation. Just observe it as it is.
10. Move relatively briskly to the forehead, followed by eyebrows, eyes, ears, cheeks, mouth, jaw, chin, neck, shoulders, etc. Engaging the same line of questioning each time. When you hit the back and buttocks, make sure to mention pressure from the weight of your body pressing into the surface you are sitting down on as an option.
11. Then move to the chest, armpit, upper arms, elbows, wrists, hands, fingers, back, torso, hips, buttocks, legs, knees, ankles, feet, toes. Then start again moving back up.
12. Tell the child(ren) that when they are finished “scanning” their whole bodies, they may may take a few more deep breaths through their noses and observe that sensation, and then quietly start to open

their eyes. When they have opened their eyes, after a few moments you can ask them to “Repeat after me: May all beings be happy and healthy.”

13. Then you may ask the children to raise a quiet hand with a quiet voice to share some of their bodily observations, if they’d like. Ask them what they liked about the exercise and what was challenging about it for them.

14. You can tell them, “Anytime you feel an emotion, you can try this to see where it lives in your body. If you feel like skipping, is it because of your joy or because your legs want to move? If you’re feeling angry, is it because your tummy is grumbling? If someone wants to invite you to the Peace table to have a meeting but you aren’t ready yet, you can try this out and see if it helps.”

15. Dismiss them one by one to quiet work time. You may raise the lights.

Points of Interest:

The feeling of the breath as it exits and enters the nostrils and lands above the upper lip. The sensations in the body. The visual deprivation. The challenge of listening to the quiet and then the body AND having your eyes closed at the same time.

Control of Error:

If there is a child talking or using their eyes and fidgeting extensively, they can’t be listening to their body very easily and will be distracting the concentration of their friends.

Variations:

Sit spot outside. Making observations utilizing all the senses in the same spot every day outdoors. You can read more about this practice at <<http://district.ops.org/Portals/0/Business%20Services/Buildings%20and%20Grounds/GSI/Reflective%20Sit%20Spots.pdf>>, <<http://www.fishwildlife.org/files/ConEd-Fostering-Outdoor-Observation-Skills.pdf>>, <<https://www.wildernessawareness.org/node/261>>, <<http://www.limehollow.org/about/Art-of-Mentoring.pdf>> and in the book *Last Child in the Woods*. I was trained in it at Two Coyotes Wilderness School <[http://www.twocoyotes.org/Photos/Photos\\_files/CSA\\_Two\\_Coyotes\\_Aug10.pdf](http://www.twocoyotes.org/Photos/Photos_files/CSA_Two_Coyotes_Aug10.pdf)>

Extensions:

Drawing a picture of or writing (whether through dictation or creative spelling) a story about their observations. Making a booklet or a painting of the experience.

Language: “Observing the breath”, “Looking with the eye above your nose”, “Judgment”, “Philtrum”, many other body parts, “tingly” and other descriptive language you may find yourself using, etc. If you feel it is appropriate to introduce, you may use the language of “Anapana”, “Vipassana” and “Metta”, words that come from the ancient language of Sanskrit and that describe our activities of focusing on our breath, our bodily sensations, and our “compassion” (perhaps another piece of nomenclature) for other beings.

Source of exercise:

Experience in 10 day Vipassana silent meditation retreats under the guidance of the teacher S.N. Goenka of Bhutan, leading meditation with my kindergarteners in afternoon enrichment during rest time. Also inspired by articles:

(<http://www.upworthy.com/this-school-replaced-detention-with-meditation-the-results-are-stunning?c=ufb1>)

it seems to be a good track to be on for eliminating all detentions and suspensions, which from what I gathered during PD in August is a strong school-wide priority. But I must say, I don't know if I'm leading these meditations very effectively. I started out just doing it completely as an improvisation. I get excellent feedback from a few kids at a time, but others clearly are not engaging/focusing at all. And besides, after the kids leave me to move up, they will need to keep up a practice with continuity to reap any of the benefits neuroscience is now so excitedly investigating (although some studies claim significant positive neurological changes can occur after only 8 weeks  
[https://www.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/~britta/SUN\\_July11\\_Baime.pdf](https://www.nmr.mgh.harvard.edu/~britta/SUN_July11_Baime.pdf))

Maybe we should try to get this group (<http://hlfinc.org/programs-services/>) to come up from Baltimore to lead a training for all the staff! I think my friend used to teach yoga in elementary schools through them, so I could find contact if it were an interest. According to the website, they already ran a program in Harrisburg public schools!

Nonviolent or compassionate communication (something like it is sort of built in to some extent in Montessori peace curriculum) seems like it has strong potential for engendering healthy, meaningful and strong communication skills, too! I would love to get trained in it to model it in the classroom. Chestnut Hill College Montessori training program also has a module which I didn't get in my training and would love to audit which is just a 2 day workshop oriented entirely around the peace curriculum. Ours was incorporated rather briefly into language or practical life, can't remember anymore.

Notes:

This will be tricky the first several times. Persevere to build good habits! More on Vipassana and Anapana at: <<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anapanasati>> and an a practice session at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5CJLKTn47k>>