



## FLORIDA BAR NEWS

### BALANCING ON THE BREATH

By Scott Rogers ▶ Special to the News ▶ Columns

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## This month we'll learn a mindfulness practice that helps to find a little more balance amid the challenging moments of our life.



Life is a balancing act. Meaningful engagement with work, family, friends, community, and ourselves can often be challenging given how we over-extend ourselves, underestimate how long things will take, and are continually presented with new requests and changing circumstances.

Life is also a balancing act when interacting with people whose positions differ from our own. We may wish to maintain an attitude that is friendly and supportive while we communicate ideas and beliefs that are important to us. In the adversarial realm, we understand that we'll only get so far, and the project may be futile from the start. Sometimes we take this personally, but at least we know it's the cost of doing business and, indeed, it is a business.

But in the context of friends, family and colleagues, the desire to connect and even persuade can lead to great distress when met with opposition, especially when that opposition is fierce. Deeply held values and beliefs appear to be disregarded, even mocked. For those among us interested in having satisfying relationships and collaborating in bringing about a better world (which probably is most of us), we can feel frustrated, disappointed, and at a loss.

This month we'll learn a mindfulness practice that helps to find a little more balance amid the challenging moments of our life, whether we find ourselves overwhelmed at work or feeling the pain of a difficult conversation.

### ATTENTION AND AWARENESS

We'll begin by balancing attention and awareness in a way that can help harmonize our experience — whatever we may be trying to balance. As has been touched on [previously](#), attention involves a narrowing of our experience while awareness has a more open and receptive quality. Some [mindfulness](#)

practices, such as “focused attention” zero in on attention while others, such as Open Monitoring, are more explicitly oriented toward cultivating awareness. Mindfulness can be viewed as a balancing of these two ways of experiencing the world, moment to moment, and this mindfulness practice explores one method of doing so.

If the distinction is unclear, consider how at this moment you are focusing attention on these words — *attention*. At the same time, you are at least dimly cognizant of various sounds, sights, and other sensory stimuli — *awareness*. As a rough shorthand, you are paying attention to what appears in the foreground of your experience while you are aware of some of what is taking place in the background. Should your focus shift to an object in the background, then that object moves into the foreground while what had been the focus of your attention moves into the background.

## BREATHING IN AND BREATHING OUT

Each time we breathe we activate the autonomic nervous system. Breathing in, which tends to increase heart rate, blood pressure, and the release of stress hormones, engages the sympathetic nervous system. Breathing out moves these physiological processes in the other direction, as the parasympathetic nervous system engages. The breathing process itself is a natural balancing act. You have likely learned that slowing down the breath can be helpful for relaxing, and that this effect is even more pronounced when the out-breath is extended.

The below exercise involves bringing together the calming potential of a slower deeper breath, with a balancing of attention and awareness. While this may seem complicated, in practice it is straightforward and the more it is practiced — whether for formal periods of 5, 10 or 15 minutes, or in short segments of a few breaths — the easier it becomes to implement and sustain in challenging moments.

## BALANCING THE BREATH

While many mindfulness practices call for merely observing the breath as it flows, this practice calls for the deliberate (but not forced) slowing down of the breath.

- Breathe in a little more slowly and deeply than you normally breathe.
- Breathe out a steady, tempered, and full outbreath.
- Do this for a few breath cycles.

This portion of the practice helps to find a good balance of alert and relaxed.

## BALANCING ATTENTION AND AWARENESS

Many mindfulness practices steady attention on an object, like the breath, or let go of an object in favor of a more observational stance, noticing what arises and passes away, moment by moment. This practice invites you to turn “outward” and observe what is taking place around you on the in-breath and to turn “inward” and attend to the sensations of the body on the out-breath.

The below instruction builds on the above and adds this element.

- Now, on the in-breath, observe what is arising around you — this may entail sights, sounds, smells, etc.
- On the out-breath feel your attention settle into the sensations of the body.
- Breathing in, you are open and receptive to the world around you.
- Breathing out, you gently shift attention to the sensations of the body.
- Whether it is the work on your desk, the news of the day, or a person you are talking to, on the in-breath, expand the field of awareness around you, beyond the work, the news, the person.
- And on the out-breath, settle into the body.
- Do this for a few breaths.

This practice is one that you can self-guide. You can [listen to this recording](#) that explores a short practice to get you started. It can be useful to help you reset and recharge — to recalibrate your balance — at various times during the day, and it can be a helpful go-to practice during challenging moments of the day, whether feeling overwhelmed and stressed or frustrated and angry in a challenging conversation. On the in-breath you observe, with a soft and broad lens, the world around you which can help release fixating on one thing. On the out-breath, you ever so slightly shift attention to the body, which can bring about a grounding, stabilizing effect. It can be done relatively effortless such that no one knows and you do not lose touch with what is taking place. To the contrary, it may enrich your responsiveness, along with your well-being.

As members of a profession that seeks to bring clarity out of chaos, and resolve disputes that separate and divide us, we are more than ever being called upon to serve as models for civil discourse,

collaboration, and mutual respect. I hope you find this exercise to be helpful as we navigate the interesting and challenging terrain upon which we are all traveling.



*Scott Rogers, M.S., J.D., is a nationally recognized leader in the area of mindfulness in law and founded and directs the University of Miami School of Law's Mindfulness in Law Program where he teaches mindful ethics, mindful leadership, mindfulness and negotiation, and mindfulness in law. He is the creator of Jurisight, one of the first CLE programs in the country to integrate mindfulness and neuroscience and conducts workshops and presentations on the role of mindfulness in legal education and across the legal profession. He is author of the recently released, **"The Mindful Law Student: A Mindfulness in Law Practice Guide,"** written for all audiences.*