The Breath

Take the breath, for instance.

We take it so much for granted. Unless, that is, you have a bad cold or can't breathe easily for some reason or another.

Then all of a sudden, the breath may become the only thing in the world you are interested in.

Yet the breath is coming in and going out of your body all the time. The fact is that we are being breathed. We drink in the air on each in-breath, giving it back to the world on each out-breath. Our lives depend on it. Suzuki Roshi referred to its coming in and going out over and over again as "a swinging door." And since we can't leave home without this vital and mysterious "swinging door," our breathing can serve as a convenient first object of attention to bring us back into the present moment, because we are only breathing now—the last breath is gone, the next one hasn't come yet—it is always a matter of this one. So it is an ideal anchor for our wayward attention. It keeps us in the present moment.

This is one of many reasons why paying attention to the sensations of breathing in the body serves as the first object of attention for beginning students in many different meditative traditions. But attending to the feeling of
the breath in the body is not only a beginner’s practice. It may be simple, but the Buddha himself taught that the breath has within it everything you

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This is one of many reasons why paying attention to the sensations of breathing in the body serves as the first object of attention for beginning students in many different meditative traditions. But attending to the feeling of the breath in the body is not only a beginner’s practice. It may be simple, but the Buddha himself taught that the breath has within it everything you
would ever need for cultivating the full range of your humanity, especially your capacity for wisdom and for compassion.

The reason, as we shall see shortly, is that paying attention to the breath is not primarily about the breath, nor is paying attention to any other object that we might choose as an object of attention primarily about that object. Objects of attention help us to attend with greater stability. Gradually we can come to feel what the attending itself is all about. It is about the relationship between what seems like the perceiver (you) and the perceived (whatever object you are attending to). These come together into one seamless, dynamical whole in awareness, because they were never fundamentally separate in the first place.

It is the awareness that is primary.
Awareness

Mindfulness Is Awareness

As I suggested in the Introduction, my operational definition of mindfulness is that it is *paying attention on purpose in the present moment*.
Sometimes I like to add the phrase “as if your life depended on it,” because it does to such a profound extent.

But technically speaking, mindfulness is what arises when you pay attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally, and as if your life depended on it. And what arises is nothing other than awareness itself.

Awareness is a capacity that we are all intimately familiar with and yet are simultaneously complete strangers to. So the training in mindfulness that we will be exploring together is really the cultivation of a resource that is already ours. It doesn’t require going anywhere, it doesn’t require getting anything, but it does require learning how to inhabit another domain of mind that we are, as a rule, fairly out of touch with. And that is what you might call the being mode of mind.

Doing and Being

Doing Mode and Being Mode
Most of our lives we are absorbed in doing: in getting things done, in going rapidly from one thing to the next, or in multitasking — attempting to juggle a bunch of different things at the very same time.

... Often our lives become so driven that we are moving through our moments to get to better ones at some later point. We live to check things off our to-do list, then fall into bed exhausted at the end of the day, only to jump up the next morning to get on the treadmill once again. This way of living, if you can call it living, is compounded by all the ways in which our lives are now driven by the ever-quickening expectations we place on ourselves and that others place on us and we on them, generated in large measure by our increasing dependence on ubiquitous digital technology and its ever-accelerating effects on our pace of life.

If we are not careful, it is all too easy to fall into becoming more of a human doing than a human being, and forget who is doing all the doing, and why.

This is where mindfulness comes in. Mindfulness reminds us that it is possible to shift from a doing mode to a being mode through the application of attention and awareness. Then our doing can come out of our being and be much more integrated and effective. What is more, we cease exhausting ourselves so much as we learn to inhabit our own body and the only moment in which we are ever alive — this one.