

## Three Stage Counting by Nick Koch

A beginning method to start meditation practice sometimes recommended in Theravada and Zen traditions is mindfulness of breathing with counting. This article will introduce a graduated three tier approach to counting starting with a easy method and finishing with a more difficult method. Counting is a useful beginner practice because it is difficult for someone to fool themselves that they are able to remain with each and every breath if they constantly lose track of the count.

Breathing with counting is a preliminary exercise where one is mindful of both the breath and counting, and eventually as one develops a good degree of continuity of mindfulness they can drop the counting. By counting one actively uses the thinking mind to assist remaining focused. Try to ignore or drop any other thoughts besides the count if they are not directed related and helpful to the practice at hand. Consider them as just passing by in the background. Remember counting is only a support for your practice, so try to keep most of your attention on the breath and body with the counting as a gentle reminder.

1. The first stage is used for the first couple minutes of a meditation or when your mind is exceptionally busy. Counting from 1 to 8, mentally note the number to yourself three times while breathing in or out. Divide the duration of your breath roughly into three sections of beginning, middle, and end, with each section receiving a mental count. For example, while breathing in mentally note 1, 1, 1. Breathing out 2, 2, 2. Go up to 8 and then return to 1. If at any point you lose track simply return to counting 1, 1, 1 on the in breath.
2. On the second stage you mentally note a number only once while breathing in or out instead of three times. Try placing the number at the ending section of each breath. So while breathing in note 1, breathing out note 2, and so on until 8 and return to 1. When this seems easy enough, you can try moving on.
3. On the third stage you mentally note a number once after breathing both in and out once. For example, breathe in, then breathe out and note 1 at the ending of the out breath. Continue the count to 8, and then return to 1. A typical daily breathing rate is around 12 in-out breaths a minute, but if your breath and body has calmed significantly you may only note a number once every 15 seconds or so. If you lose the count several times, feel free to go back to stage two. When the counting is easily accomplished for an extended period of time, say 20 minutes, or when you sense that counting is actually interfering with being more fully attentive to the breath, body, feelings, mind states, and mental objects, then try dropping the counting. You can always go back to counting as you find useful.