"The art of living," says Alan Watts, "is neither careless drifting on the one hand, nor a fearful clinging on the other. It consists of being sensitive to each moment, in regarding it as utterly new and unique this breath, having the mind and heart open and wholly receptive to what is now."
We start with the breath as one of the most universal of meditations, because it is always with us. Mindfulness of breath anchors the mind, the body, and the heart. When we sit to meditate, we find that the mind wanders. It plans, it judges, it schemes, it makes stories, it dwells on the past, it worries about the future--it simply will not be still. This is often referred to as the “monkey mind”. This is normal and has been written about for centuries. Modern society makes this even worse as we are now programmed for 15 second attention spans with sound bites and commercials and expected to cram too much into our lives. Being distracted and unfocused is typical in our culture.

How can we actually learn to be here and to be steady? The breath. The beautiful thing about the breath is that it is always with us but also it is always changing--it is long, it is short, it has different rhythms, it is always morphing and moving. This brings us more intimately into the aliveness of life. It connects us with all things that breathe.

TECHNIQUES FOR GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE BREATH
1. As you focus your attention, where do you sense your breath? Is it in the nostrils? The rise and fall of the chest? The movement of the lower belly? Where do you feel the breath most easily in the body?
2. Adding a “whisper of language” to your practice. Thich Nhat Hanh, a Vietnamese monk, has a short beautiful book on mindfulness of breath practice: You Are Alive. Once you have figured out where you sense the breath most in your body, he suggests adding a calming language, such as, “breathing in, I am calm, breathing out, I am kind.” If you choose to do this, the “whisper of language” should be about 5% of your practice; the other 95% feel the direct experience of the breath moving in your body.
3. Counting the breath is another way to establish connection with the breath. Let the counting, which is another “whisper of language” be 5% of your practice, the other 95% be to feel the direct experience of the breath in your body. Taking one in- and one out-breath to be “1”, count to 10, and then start over again. This is more difficult than it seems.
4. Training the mind with kindness. Every time your mind wanders and you realize it, is a moment of mindfulness. Gently, each time, bring your attention back to focusing on the breath. Keep bringing your attention back to the breath. This is using the breath as an anchor.

ANTICIPATING HOW TO USE THIS WITH CLIENTS

Mindfulness Meditation needs to be customized for certain populations, especially for those with PTSD and with cognitive challenges. GET APPROPRIATE TRAINING FROM A CERTIFIED TEACHER BEFORE IMPLEMENTING ANY OF THESE TOOLS.

There are two tools that you have learned that may already be of assistance to you: focus on posture and focus on the breath. When interacting with a client, it is extremely helpful to be aware of your own posture and breath and to modulate them consciously. Over time, these tools can be taught to clients.

QUESTIONS:

1. Is this the same as the practice I do in my yoga class?
   I am not certain what you do in your yoga class; however, I would guess that you are being taught pranayama. Pranayama is the formal practice of controlling the breath; there are many techniques and sequences. Prana is the life force. Ayama means controlling or extending. So, pranayama is controlling or extending the life force.

   What we are doing in class is different from pranayama per se. In Mindfulness Meditation, the breath is the first tool we learn as an anchor, as a tool to calm and steady the mind. When the mind wanders, we bring it back by focusing on the breath.

2. When I hear the bell at the end, I am startled.
   While I do not wish you to be startled, this is a positive observation. It speaks to the depth of your concentration in meditation. If you wish, please come and make the singing bowl sound yourself. I will focus on sounding the bowl more quietly.