



States of Being

Robert Hodge

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What does being mean to you?

The word being has several meanings. From vocabulary.com: "A being is any living creature, from a person to a bug. Being also refers to the state of existing.

A quote from vocabulary.com: "To be, or not to be" — that is the question when you're talking about being. Things that exist are in a state of being: this meaning of being is a little vague, but it has to do with the way things are alive and real. The other meaning is easier: beings are living things. Every person is a being, and so is every animal. Beings are no longer in a state of being when they're dead."¹

In this talk, I am going to be using being as the state of existence. In this context, being is a verb when one wants to describe their state of existence using an object. For example, I am being happy, still, angry and so on. Continuing with vocabulary.com: "The verb be is one of the most frequently used words in English, and **it often takes the form of am, are, were, or was**. When you make plans to meet someone later, you could say, "I'll be on the steps in front of the library," and when you talk about your goals, you might confess, "I want to be a movie star." It's a verb with a complicated history, stemming mainly from the Old English *bēon*, "be, exist, or happen."²

But what do we mean when we don't use an object and just say, "I am being"?

What if we also eliminate the subject and just say "am being"?

I would like to describe three states of being that we constantly move in and out of. I didn't make up these states; they are implied by the dharma (teachings). The first two states involve different levels of awareness and include a subject (I). The last state is a different type of awareness and has no subject. The first two states are sensual being and observational being. The third state is simply being.

State 1: Sensual Being

This state is when we pursue sensual pleasures and reject sensual unpleasantness. We are not aware of the consequences of what we are doing. This is limited awareness.

We seek pleasure from what the sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind) come into contact with. And we reject what the sense organ brings to us that is unpleasant. For example, regarding sounds, we might enjoy a symphony but reject the constant, loud barking of a dog.

In general, we seek pleasure, gain, praise and fame and we reject pain, loss, criticism, and disrepute. These are what the Buddha termed the Eight Worldly Winds.³

Sensual being is a state of ignorance. In this state, we don't know and understand that everything is impermanent, has the potential to cause stress, and is not who we are.

Observational Being

Observational Being is when we are able to observe our sensual being. This is mindfulness or open awareness. We are aware of our feelings, perceptions, mental formations, and reactions. With pleasurable sensations, we know that they will not last no matter how hard we try to cling to them. For example, when we eat a meal, we can enjoy it but know that it will come to an end rather than try to keep eating and eating and eating to keep the experience and ultimately suffer. With unpleasant experiences, we know that they too are impermanent and will end.

With observational being, we are mindful (paying attention moment to what is) and can use the mindful breath when stress (suffering) arises.

What is the technique? – very simple.

- When you recognize the symptoms of stress arising (bodily sensations, thoughts), **Pause**
- If appropriate, close your eyes. (don't close them while driving or walking!)
- Observe your body for any sensations and your mind for any thoughts or emotions
- Take 5-7 deep inbreaths and outbreaths through the nostrils (this activates your parasympathetic nervous system).
- Let your breath assume its normal rhythm.
- Pay attention to the what is. (not what you would like it to be)
- If you have more time, stay with your normal breath for two or three more minutes and finish by observing the body again.

Putting mindfulness and the breath pause together, you have a wonderful tool to use when stress arises. Please feel free to use it abundantly; there is no danger of overdosage!

Thich Nhat Hanh notes: "So the object of your mindfulness is your breath, and you just focus your attention on it. Breathing in, this is my in-breath. Breathing out, this is my out-breath. When you do that, the mental discourse will stop. You don't think anymore. You don't have to make an effort to stop your thinking; you bring your attention to your in-breath and the mental discourse just stops. That is the miracle of the practice. You don't think of the past anymore. You don't think of the future. You don't think of your projects, because you are focusing your attention, your mindfulness, on your breath."⁴

Being

Being is when you are completely in the experience without any self-consciousness. This is pure awareness. Think of this as when you are completely engaged in an activity such reading a book, watching a movie, playing a sport when you are completely engrossed in the activity. In fact, you are the activity. You are so into the activity that you aren't judging, making commentary, or decisions. You are just being and your actions come automatically. Athletes would say that they are in the zone.

You can't will yourself into being; it just happens. I remember a number of years ago, I was walking my dog around the neighborhood trying to be mindful of everything I saw. This was not pure awareness; it was multitasking. The more you try to be aware, the odds are lowered that you will ever reach this state.

So how do you reach this state of being? By letting go.

This year, I had to do my income taxes, gathering all of the necessary data to give to my accountant. And every year, I dread having to do this. What I found was just let go, get in and do it. Two hours later, I was interrupted and came out of being my income taxes. While I was being, I wasn't judging how bad this task was, I wasn't constantly moaning about it and I was not deciding to quit or do something else.

There is a saying in Zen that when you are doing the dishes, do the dishes, nothing else. Your consciousness can make contact with only one thing at a time. So when you multitask, your consciousness is switching back and forth. It has been shown that multitasking is not only less productive, it can cause accidents. Many times I have cut my finger slicing vegetables because my thoughts were elsewhere.

In sensual being, we are in a constant state of judging: "Am I having fun?", ignorant that the sensual pleasure is fleeting.. In the observational state, we pay attention to our body tone and thoughts and take mindful breath pauses when needed. In the being state, we are just being and can only look back to know that we were in that state. We can't know while we are being. The self is no longer.

¹ [Being - Definition, Meaning & Synonyms | Vocabulary.com](https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/being)

² <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/being>

³ [The Failings of the World Lokavipatti Sutta \(AN 8:6\)](#)

⁴ [Thich Nhat Hanh on The Practice of Mindfulness](#)