

# Dancing mindfulness

A Creative  
Path to Healing &  
Transformation

JAMIE MARICH, PHD, LPCC-S

FOREWORD BY CHRISTINE VALTERS PAINTNER, PHD, OBL. OSB, REACE

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## Chapter 1

# Breath

## Life Dancing Through Us

The mind is king of the senses, and the breath is the king of the mind.

—*Swami Svātmārāma*, Hatha Yoga Pradipika

Absent any major health issues, the typical adult takes anywhere from fifteen to twenty breaths each minute—on the lower end that makes twenty thousand breaths a day.<sup>1</sup> Each year, that tally is anywhere from 7 million to 8 million complete cycles of inhale-exhale per person. Consider how many breaths you’ve already taken in your lifetime. We pass through our days with our lungs pumping on autopilot, sustaining life. But how often do we stop to take a mindful pause and harness our breath’s full potential? Do we ever pause to contemplate the wonder of what’s happening in our bodies as we inhale and exhale? What if we could learn to cherish our breath as life itself dancing through our being?

I’ve gained much experience teaching people how to breathe deeply and fully in my professional vocation as a counselor and as a facilitator

of yoga and dance. I teach my clients how to use their own breath to benefit their health and well-being. They often describe breathwork as a gateway to healing that they had yet to explore. Some people are hesitant to try deep, mindful breathing at first—they may think that it's stupid or they may have had negative experiences in previous attempts at practices like yoga or guided meditation. Others have to be gently guided to breathwork because the prospect of getting too relaxed is scary. But once we address any initial resistance and the mindful breathing begins to flow, I start witnessing small miracles on the quest toward wellness. When people get to know their breath, they are better able to scan their physical body and respond to what the body is asking for, whether it be sleep, stress relief, or the need for healthier food.

Commitment to deep, mindful breathing can lead to easier identification and management of difficult emotions. Our breath, like the wind passing through a sail, allows us to navigate potentially treacherous emotional terrain. Being able to breathe with whatever may rise up—anger, fear, grief, shame, or any number of other complex feelings—makes way for the practice of self-compassion. Intricately related to the mindfulness attitude of nonjudgment, self-compassion helps us respond to whatever may surface in all areas of life. The practice of self-compassion allows us to dig deeply and work to heal the old wounds that keep us from moving forward in the lives we want for ourselves. Ultimately, self-compassion empowers our own growth and personal transformation.

### **Breath as Sacred Life Force**

In cultivating a connection to breath, we can more effectively tap into the voice of our inner self to discover what our spirit needs. Companionship, solitude, or loving-kindness are all examples of what may be revealed. The major faith traditions of the world all venerate breath's sacred, healing power in their sacred texts. Muslims believe that we breathe in the whole universe in each breath (Qur'an 6:156; 16:40). In his analysis of these Qur'anic passages and the writings of Sufi

mystic Ibn 'Arabi, translator William Chittick observes, “God articulates each creature as a ‘word’ in his own breath, so the underlying substance of each thing is breath.”<sup>2</sup>

The Muslim-born poet Kabir, whose writings influenced the development of the Bhakti movement within Hinduism, elegantly expressed this vital belief:

Kabir says: Student, what is God?  
He is the breath inside the breath.<sup>3</sup>

The Chandogya Upanishad (5, 1, 1) describes *prana* (breath) as the oldest and greatest element of living. A poetry unfolds throughout this section to explain that even when other functions of life may fail—sight, speech, hearing, thought—the breath remains. In referencing each organ of the human body, the sacred text proclaims that “The *prana* alone is all of these.” Buddhist texts spanning a period of over two thousand years are filled with teachings on the mindfulness of breath, with the Anapanasati Sutra providing the most specific instructions on breathing meditation. A passage from Theragata, a Buddhist scripture from the Pitaka Sutra translated as “verses of the elder monks,” encapsulates the importance of mindful breathing in Buddhist practice:

*One who has gradually practiced,  
Developed and brought to perfection  
Mindfulness of the in-and-out breath  
As taught by the Enlightened One  
Illuminates the entire world  
Like the moon when freed from the clouds. (548)*

Various writings in the Taoist tradition also convey a similarly lyrical reverence for the power of simple breathing. Ch'en Hsu-pai, as translated by Thomas Cleary, noted, “Breathing out and breathing in without interruption, the complete embryo forms and combines

with the original beginning.”<sup>4</sup> The theme of breath as rebirth radiates throughout Taoist texts.

The Judeo-Christian tradition also speaks to the life force that is breath. Growing up in this tradition, I heard the phrase *breath of life*, originating with the creation story in Genesis, with great regularity. In the gospel of John (20:22), Jesus appeared to his apostles after the resurrection and breathed on them, birthing the new church—the new Adam—into existence. Many scripture references from both the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures describe breath as a gift from God. The book of Job contains several passages specifically referencing breath as both a divine gift and a creative force (4:9; 12:10; 27:3; 33:4). Meditation scholar George Burke (Swami Nirmalanda Giri)<sup>5</sup> explains that in the Jewish tradition, meditation on the breath is a direct meditation on God.

Although all these passages speak to me, I am especially moved by the idea of breathing something into existence. That something doesn't have to be at the level of the new church, as Christ breathed; it can be as simple as breath giving life to the present moment. We can give breath to new connections, to new ideas. All innovation and creation is born of breath.

The words from Swami Svātmārāma's fifteenth-century manual on Hatha Yoga, which open this chapter, are often attributed to B.K.S. Iyengar (1918–2014), one of the major forces in bringing yoga to the West. In his classic book *Light on Yoga*, he wrote, “The mind is king of the senses, and the breath is the king of the mind.” Reading Iyengar brought this idea to my attention several years before I set out on my own creative path of dancing mindfulness. Iyengar's presentation on the sutras and texts from the yogic traditions inspired me to incorporate breath more fully into my spiritual practices and in all areas of my life.

Not only do these teachings help me when I dance, but they also carry special meaning to me in my counseling work with others. Like most psychotherapists in the modern era, I received my training solely in the cognitive-behavioral paradigm. Cognitive-behavioral therapy



holds that if people can change their thoughts, they can change their behaviors. However, many of us encounter limitations with this approach because the part of the brain that is affected by trauma and body-level stress has nothing to do with rational thought. I've personally and professionally witnessed how the gift of deep breathing can help us access those areas of the brain that need the most healing. These areas of the brain deal with emotion and body processes, not words and rational thought. One of my first yoga teachers slightly reworded Iyengar's quote as follows: "The mind controls the body, but the breath controls the mind." Upon hearing that, it clicked that it is not sufficient to just change our thinking to experience behavioral shifts. Rather, we must first change our breath, which can alter our thinking, positively impacting our behavior.

Martha Graham (1894–1991), the mother of contemporary dance, possessed a clear understanding about the impact of breath on motion. Many present-day teachers of conscious dance look to Martha Graham as a role model. Her inspirational sayings, such as "Dance is the hidden language of the soul," are often published as inspirational memes on social media. Promotional advertisements for dance classes and workshops also make use of them. After seeing so many Martha Graham quotes used in this way, I decided to go directly to the source and read her autobiography to discover what else she had to teach me. Aptly titled *Blood Memory*, Graham's autobiography is a fascinating study in holistic living. Her teaching on the breath brought tears to my eyes when I first read it, and I strive to convey the spirit of her message as I share the practice of dancing mindfulness with others:

Every time you breathe life in or expel it, it is a release or a contraction. It is that basic to the body. You are born with these two movements and you keep both until you die. But you begin to use them consciously so that they are beneficial to the dance dramatically. You must animate that energy within yourself. Energy is that thing that sustains the world and the

universe. It animates the world and everything in it. I recognized early in my life that there was this kind of energy, some animating spark, or whatever you choose to call it. It can be Buddha, it can be anything, it can be everything. It begins with the breath.<sup>6</sup>

Using Graham's wisdom as inspiration, you can practice dancing mindfulness even if breath is the only element you choose to activate. Breath is life, dancing through us.

### Setting Sail with Personal Practice

I usually begin dancing mindfulness practice in silence with three minutes or longer of a concentrated breath awareness exercise. Deep, mindful breathing stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, essentially flipping your fight-flight-freeze reaction on its head. By deep breathing you are instead signaling your body to enter rest mode, and in this slower, nonreactionary state your ability to notice what's in the moment becomes more acute. Mindfulness is a practice of responding instead of reacting to stress, and the breath allows for this responsiveness. Listening to your breath provides you with critical information that can keep you safe during your dancing mindfulness practice. For instance, if you notice that you are becoming short of breath, it may be a sign that you've pushed yourself too far, physically or emotionally. In conventional exercise forms, we might say that this is a place to catch your breath. In dancing mindfulness practice, I like to say that these are moments to get reacquainted with your breath. By checking in with our breath in this way, our body will let us know if we need to rest in stillness or if, supported by our breath, we are able to keep moving in our dance.

How you ultimately choose to incorporate breath awareness strategies into your *Dancing Mindfulness* classes or personal dancing mindfulness practice is up to you. As you experiment with the practices provided here, feel free to modify them and make them your own; make the adjustments you need that help you connect with your

breath. In doing so, may you become acquainted with the dance of your breath, and allow the breath to nourish your dance.

### It Begins with Three

Many of the great writers on integrative medicine, including popular holistic personality Andrew Weil, MD, suggest that if a person can breathe mindfully, starting with three minutes each day, benefits will inevitably result. According to Weil, these benefits include more energy, a greater sense of calmness, and aid in healing stress-related health problems, like panic attacks and digestive disorders. In my years of counseling, teaching, and facilitating, I've discovered that three minutes is an excellent starting point for most people. Your mind may start to wander or drift off, and that is okay; beginning a mindfulness practice is about just that, *practicing* the art of coming back to the breath and learning that you can always come back to the breath.

I ease myself into personal practice with a brief breath awareness exercise and meditation. This breath-intensive warm-up is a key feature distinguishing dancing mindfulness from other, more workout-oriented dance forms. I recently attended a fitness-based class where the instructor's entire opening statement was on the importance of isolating the core muscles throughout the class so as to obtain bigger, more powerful movements. Indeed, the concept of core muscle isolation, which is essentially the societal message of "sucking it in," is what many conventionally trained dancers are taught. Dancing mindfulness is about going with the breath and letting the breath guide the movement. By staying true to what the breath reveals in its large, numinous waves, the movements may not be big and powerful, but they will be authentic.

### Try This: Getting to Know Your Breath

- Begin in a comfortable, seated position. Focus on elongating your spine and avoid forcing any movements—think of sitting in a position that, for you, represents awareness.

- Just take a few moments to notice the natural rhythm of your breath. You don't have to do anything special, just notice. Be a witness, not a judge. If your mind starts to wander, that is okay. Know that you can always come back to the breath.
- After you've spent some time with your natural breath, I invite you to take your breath potential a little deeper. If you choose, you can bring one hand to your stomach area to further pay attention to your "belly breathing." On your next inhale, I invite you to consciously deepen the breath, feeling your stomach area fully expand to help you deepen the inhale.
- On the exhale, let the breath exit your mouth slowly and naturally as you notice the stomach draw back in. If it feels more natural to exhale through your nose, that is an appropriate modification. Another modification is to purposefully pucker your mouth—this allows you to slow down and notice the flow of the exhale.
- Once again, inhale with your nose and notice the belly expand, helping you to deepen your breath. Exhale with your mouth, as your belly pulls back in. Try several of these at your own pace.
- Continue noticing your breath, only now start tuning in to every little detail that you can. What sound does your breath make as your body forms and releases each breath? How does the breath feel in your body? Perhaps the breath even has a taste or a smell to it. Regard your breath as your body's own guide.
- Wherever else you may go with your dancing mindfulness practice on any given day, continue with this mindful breathing, even if you start to move your body in a more dynamic way. The breath will always tell you exactly what you need to know about yourself and your experience.

## Finding Your Comfort Zone, and Moving Beyond It

As a practitioner of dancing mindfulness, you likely fall into one of two boats: either you love to dance so much the thought of slowing down to focus on your breath repulses you, or you are comfortable doing breathwork but you feel self-conscious about dancing. Think about which statement best describes you. Begin with where you are at, and then practice sailing the boat that is the greatest departure from your comfort zone as your practice deepens.

Let's start with the first situation: you love to dance but slowing down to relax and breathe unnerves you. In your own space, cue some music that speaks to you and dance with abandon. So much of dancing mindfulness draws on the joy of simply turning on the music and dancing around the house, so go ahead and do that! Whenever possible, be aware of your breath as you dance, paying special attention to deepening your breath to give you more energy as you move. When the song is over, come to a place of stillness; you can be standing, kneeling, in a lunge, or sitting, wherever the dance brings you at the end. Consider the term *stillness*. In the stillness just notice your breathing, nonjudgmentally, and pay attention to the process of allowing your breath to slow its pace over a period of time. This period is a perfect opportunity to also notice any of the attitudes of mindfulness that reveal themselves in that stillness:

- What is my breath teaching me about not judging myself so harshly?
- What is this experience of coming to stillness in my breath teaching me about trusting the process and not obsessing about outcomes?
- What may be keeping me from letting go of the need to control and just listening to my breath?

These questions are simply examples of what has come up for me during this practice—your experience may be different and totally organic to you. Whatever surfaces, I invite you to just cradle it in

your awareness. From that point, notice if the practice prompts you toward further stillness or toward an enhanced appreciation of the mindfulness of your movement.

In the second scenario, let's say you are the type who gets freaked out by dancing or moving, especially out of fear that others are judging you. Maybe when you try to move freely, your own inner critic begins to chatter—for many of us, that's the worst judge of all! Begin with a breath practice of your choice, using the "Getting to Know Your Breath" practice (page 7) if you need some guidance. After you've noticed your breathing begin to deepen and lengthen, think about the breath moving first to your arms. As you inhale, begin to move your arms in a way that feels right for you. You may draw inspiration from calling to mind an image that works for you, like palm trees swaying in the breeze or the arms of a mythical creature moving in a celestial trance. If it helps, imagine that your breath has a color or a mix of colors—perhaps you are breathing in a swirl of blue, purple, and rose. Imagine the breath sending those colors to your arms, inspiring movement. Let the breath do the work. You might want to think about your breath as channeling the Divine. Then simply notice what happens.

In addition to practicing nonjudgment, this experience is a perfect opportunity to practice the attitude of beginner's mind. Beginner's mind challenges us to set aside any preconceived judgments or expectations about what should be happening and engage in an activity as if we're doing it for the first time. Let the breath move your arms as a child might move his—uninhibited by self-criticism or judgment on how things *should* look. In doing so, a sense of wonder and curiosity may rise up within you. If that happens, play with it for a while. After you move your arms, see where your breath goes next and continue with this pattern of experimental movement. If you want to do this in silence, you may. If listening to music helps you, go ahead and cue some up for this practice. Wherever this particular practice may take you, let your breath guide the process.

In my personal dancing mindfulness practice, I work with the idea of "breathing in" the music. I invite myself to breathe in the sound

that I'm hearing, and when I facilitate classes I invite my participants to do the same. This esoteric invitation may sound like a completely foreign idea. Sometimes I am met with stares, suggesting, "What do you mean *breathe in* the music?" If you can ponder the idea for a moment, see if it offers another channel for you to work with the element of breath. Along with the heartbeat, breath offers a natural rhythm that, together with music, can guide you to deeper levels of awareness in your body and on your emotional journey. In personal practice, call upon this idea of "breathing in" sound whenever it feels right to do so, or if you need some inspiration. The following chapter on sound will hopefully foster even more ideas on how you can fuse breath and sound in your personal practice.

### Try This: Breathing in the Music

- Bring your hand to your heart.
- As you hear the first tones of music, specifically draw your awareness to your breath.
- Remember that breathing is a sacred act, your breath is a channel, sending information from your soul to your body.
- Let the tones of the music blend with your breath.
- Allow your breath to translate the message that your spirit wishes to send to your body.
- Notice what happens, refraining from judging or anticipating. Simply be present to how this practice unfolds.

From Jamie's Music Box:

#### Top Picks for Breathing in the Music

Here are some of my personal favorite pieces for "breathing in the music" in my dancing mindfulness practice. If these don't work for you, keep in mind that there is no "wrong" music in dancing

mindfulness practice. Just experiment with what helps you best connect to the practice. I find experimentation to be a fun part of the process.

- “The Feeling Begins” (Peter Gabriel)
- Theme from *The Mission* (Ennio Morricone)
- “Om” (Soulfood)
- “The Morning Room” (Helios)
- “Ubi Caritas” (Gregorian chant)
- “The Wind” (Cat Stevens/Yusuf Islam)
- “Iguazu” from the *Babel* soundtrack (Gustavo Santaollala); soundtracks are a good place to find similar types of music
- Gentle instrumental versions of Celtic folk songs, such as “Wild Mountain Thyme,” “Fields of Athenry,” or “Danny Boy”; American folk songs, such as “Simple Gifts,” can be lovely, as well as certain versions of folk songs from any global tradition. I strongly resonate with traditional Chinese music for this practice.
- “Thaïs: Meditation” (Jules Massenet) and similar classical pieces that make gentle yet emotionally evocative use of pianos and/or violins; “Für Elise” (Ludwig van Beethoven) is another solid option in this vein.

## Resting with the Breath

In my personal dancing mindful practice, I wind down the class with a classic, yogic *sivasana*, or relaxation period. *Sivasana*, or corpse pose, is exactly what the name suggests. In this practice you return to the ground, lying flat on your back (if physically possible), with palms up and, if comfortable, eyes closed. Although the term *corpse* is morbid to some, I have always embraced the “deathly” connotation



of that word to mean surrender, as opposed to actual death. *Sivasana* typically offers me an opportunity to revisit the breath in this position of profound connection to the earth. I often thank my breath for guiding me through my practice that day. When I am in *sivasana*, I sometimes contemplate the death of my old unhealthy ways of being so that I can more fully embrace my newfound connection to the earth, my body, and, of course, my breath. Other times my practice of *sivasana* takes me to a place of simple, pure being—I think of nothing, and that’s the beauty of it!

### Launching Out: Sharing the Practice with Others and Deepening Your Personal Practice

If you are responding to an inner prompting to share the dancing mindfulness practice with others, the practices covered in this chapter are appropriate for group facilitation. I routinely use “Getting to Know Your Breath” and “Breathing in the Music” in *Dancing Mindfulness* classes; the key is modifying each practice to the respective groups. For instance, if you notice that three minutes is either too long or not long enough in “Getting to Know Your Breath,” you are free to alter the time that you spend in this practice. I strongly suggest that you work in this breath awareness exercise at some point during the practice, usually the beginning. The only exception I make to that suggestion is if you are working with a group that, overall, may seem too fidgety to even settle down to breathe. If that’s the case, consider beginning with free-form movement and then working to a place of stillness.

Another major example of modification can occur during the *sivasana* period at the end of practice. You may not want to facilitate a *sivasana* in a traditional, yogic sense by having everyone lie down on the floor. In fact, if you feel that doing so leaves your group feeling emotionally vulnerable, you may have everyone end in a seated posture instead. Because of health issues, some participants are not able to lie flat on the floor. Thus, even if you are offering a classic *sivasana*, consider giving people the option of lying down, sitting on the floor

(perhaps against a wall for extra support), or returning to a chair. I provide more suggestions on facilitating an amazing *sivasana* experience for your group as we visit the other elements in the chapters to follow. As it relates to the element of breath covered in this chapter, ask yourself this question: Is the way I'm setting up the *sivasana* experience at the end of a group practice optimally conducive for helping people reconnect with their breath?

### Just Checking In

As a facilitator, I consider it a privilege to remind people to notice their breath throughout the practice, not just during the opening meditation or the closing *sivasana*. When I open a group experience, I let participants know that we will be “checking in” with the breath several times throughout the practice. *Checking in* simply means to notice and then make adjustments or modifications based on what people may discover by listening to the breath. I also advise my participants that even if I don't directly say it, they can check in with their breath at any time during the practice. In my experience, people can benefit from this “check-in” practice if they are feeling lost in a dance or uncomfortable with a certain risk the dance is asking them to take, or if their body simply needs a break.

If you're facilitating a class, your participants would obviously be annoyed if, every two minutes, you invited them to “check in with” or “notice” the breath. As with all great facilitation techniques, they have to be well placed, well timed, and properly balanced. Since I am more of a go-with-the-flow style of facilitator, I rarely plan when I'm going to do breath check-ins. I find that in a standard, hour-long class, I typically make at least an invitation every other song. Statements that I often use include:

- Remember to check in with your breath.
- Notice your breath. What is your breath telling you right now?
- Let your breathing guide your movement.

- It's important for you to continue to breathe, even when we increase the tempo.
- Know that you can always come back to the breath; your breath will tell you exactly what's going on.
- Notice what effect the music is having on your breath.
- Be aware of your breath; allow your breath to help you relax or soften.
- As you check in with your breath, thank your breath for guiding you through your practice today.
- Allow your breath to help the old fall away. Allow your breath to let the new enter in.
- Be sure to check in with your breath now that you've returned to the earth.

This practice of checking in with the breath may apply to you as you deepen your personal practice as well as in your facilitation. You may struggle with actively drawing your awareness to the breath, especially as the pace of your dance picks up. It's easy to neglect the practice of consciously noticing an element like breath unless someone is there to remind us. If you know that you struggle with breathing during personal practice, consider writing some of these facilitator statements down on sticky notes and placing them around the space where you dance mindfully. I've actively practiced dancing mindfulness for many years and I still consult my sticky notes from time to time.

These are just suggestions. Be creative and true to your authentic self as a facilitator or in your personal practice. If you are facilitating, consider what breath awareness has meant to you in your various practices, such as meditation, yoga, dance, or other spiritually creative pursuits. Share some of this personal meaning with others in the group. The best facilitation prompts flow from your own experience. Let your own relationship with your breath nurture this sense

of natural flow. Perhaps you entered a special place emotionally or spiritually as you facilitated a class. Another tip I can pass along is to take a moment during one of the silent periods in *sivasana* and really savor it. Take a deep breath yourself. Have your own special breath check-in, and any words you may require to close the class will come to you naturally.

### Weaving It All Together

A dancing mindfulness practitioner once shared something about breath that brought a huge smile to my face. This lady regularly attends community practice, and she also dances in other venues, including ballrooms and clubs. She made an observation about how one of her friends dances: “This girl is a wonderful dancer, but she forgets to breathe when she dances. She always forgets to breathe. And I’m afraid she’s going to hurt herself.” Her reflection didn’t seem nasty or judgmental, and I pursued the conversation further. The more we talked, the more we marveled at how remembering to breathe mindfully enhances the overall experience of dance. We both agreed that mindful breathing keeps us safe by telling us when we may need a break and nourishing our bodies during periods of dynamic movement. When I move together with deep breath, I consistently experience a greater sense of presence with the dance, and I find that my other senses are heightened, too. In other words, breathing consciously can help us to better savor the experience of dancing. For participants in dancing mindfulness, this idea hopefully translates into savoring life.

In his book *A Lion Among Men* (number three in the series that became the hit musical *Wicked*), Gregory Maguire expresses through the character Sister Doctor: “Remember to breathe. It is, after all, the secret of life.”<sup>7</sup> Through my journey of deepening my own personal practice and sharing it with others, I can accept the full beauty of this teaching. My breath, my life, and my dance are all one. They are connected like their own version of the holy Trinity, sustaining each other, flourishing because of each other.

I hope the suggestions offered in this chapter give you some ideas about where to start with your own dancing mindfulness practice. If you already engage in dancing mindfulness, it is my wish that revisiting some of the ideas in this chapter will help you deepen your practice. Experiment, explore, be curious. Enter the practices from a place of beginner's mind—as if you were new to this world and trying them each for the first time. May you find the breath anew in each practice. Intoning the words of Martha Graham once again, it all begins with the breath.

### Try This: Breath, the Seven Attitudes, and the Creative Arts

If you are breathing, you are dancing.

Are you allowing breath and dance to learn from each other?

Are you open to what they can teach you about living?

- Consider the seven foundational attitudes of mindfulness practice: nonjudging, patience, beginner's mind, trust, non-striving, acceptance, letting go.
- How does each attitude relate to breath? Consider assigning a physical movement or gesture to each attitude and see what happens with your breath when you do that.
- How can the practice of breath, especially in concert with movement, help you to further develop these seven attitudes for your optimal health and well-being?

I encourage you to use dance, or any of the other creative arts, to contemplate these questions—get out your journal, your paints, your pencils, your camera—whatever helps you enter this place of contemplation. Perhaps you are a songwriter, a poet, or a fiction writer. Consider these channels to help you dance with the questions. Notice the connections that rise up when you fuse the

practice of dancing mindfulness together with any of your other practices or creative pursuits.

### Other Voices on Breath

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# Notes

## Introduction

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