

Calmness (2 of 5) Supporting and Being Supported By Bodily Calm

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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On the topic of calmness, Buddhism put a lot of emphasis on tranquility of the body. In fact, in the ancient texts, the word that's often translated as “tranquility” is most often associated with the body – the body becomes tranquil. I think of it as a soft stillness that has a feeling of clarity in it. The body starts becoming and feeling clear. This is not a calmness that's soporific or letting go and luxuriating in some kind of inaction. It is a tranquility that feels vital and clear. I like the word “clear.”

There is an ancient analogy having to do with water. In running water often the surface is so agitated, rippling,

and wavy that you cannot see through the water into the bottom of the river or lake. You also cannot see a reflection of yourself. But if the water is still, or flowing very, very harmoniously and quietly, so you almost can't even see it flow, you can see through it to what's below. And you might also see the reflection of yourself on the surface.

That analogy is used to show the value of tranquility and calmness. It is hard to see the world or ourselves accurately when we're agitated. But if we could have some modicum of calmness, the minimum calmness needed is the calmness where we know we're agitated. We really know, "Oh, I'm agitated. I'm tense. I'm stressed out." That's the beginning.

As greater calmness sets in, we start seeing more clearly. This is one of the great functions of calmness. It's not calmness for his own sake, but it sets the stage for deeper states of clarity, stability, and wisdom.

Today, the topic is physical calmness. The mind and body are closely related. In some sense, they're maybe not too distinct from each other. There is a very powerful relationship between them. They kind of work in tandem or together and one affects the other. If we are agitated, with the mind jumping around, distracted, racing ahead like a crowded traffic jam of thoughts about all the things

we have to do, solve, or fix, that has an impact on the body.

You can see the energy of that kind of agitation. This can be in the fingers – tapping our fingers, playing with our fingers, or both hands coming together and rubbing each other. It can affect our posture, and how we stand. Our posture can get tense, tight, contracted, or misaligned. Agitation can affect what we do with our feet – for example when we're sitting down and the feet begin swinging or tapping a lot. All these are an expression of an inner agitation that might be there.

But posture is something we have more control over. If we pay attention to the posture, we can adjust the posture and the physical activities of the body. It's possible to stop swinging or tapping the legs. It's possible to stop playing with the fingers. It's possible to allow the arms to relax in such a way that the elbows are flapping loosely on the side of the body. They're not tense or tight. It is possible to sit or stand upright in a balanced posture.

When we're agitated, we tend to lose the balanced posture. Once we start finding a physical posture that expresses stillness, holds still, and stays tranquil, that becomes a mirror for the agitation that's going on in the state of the mind we have. It is considered good in

Buddhism when we start seeing what's actually happening. Rather than the agitation compelling us to move, shake, or fidget, we begin to take our lives back.

We begin to feed and support the calm body. The idea is that we have a calm body available to us. Sometimes it might be called a “spiritual body” or a “deep body.” The calm body is something that we need to feed or support. It is one of the great assets that we have because of how much clarity it provides, what a strong reference point it provides for understanding what's going on, and how much it clears the inner eyes so that we can see what's happening, rather than being pushed around by what's happening within.

As I said, we have some control over our bodies – not the inner physiology of the body, but the posture and the activities the body is engaged in. If we are too distracted to know what we're doing with our fingers when we're fidgeting with them, chances are that level of distraction is limiting our wisdom, our intelligence, our creativity, and our ability to see clearly. So, use your fingers fidgeting as a mindfulness bell, as a reminder, “Oh, I'm not supporting, feeding, or nourishing what's most wise, most kind, and most supportive for this body and mind. Let me see what I can do to support the calm body.”

We don't do this so we can go around completely calm, but so that we're calm enough to not be controlled

by agitation, anxiety, and desires, or compelled to keep moving, to react, and to be distracted and caught up in thoughts and ideas.

So become more attuned to your body – in particular, to how the body gets agitated, and that you have the ability to not act on that agitation. Instead, hold the body quiet. Let the posture be calm. Let the posture be like a loving container that holds the agitation.

I liken this a little bit to a small kid on the nursery school playground, who has stumbled and scraped her knee. She's upset and crying and she throws herself into the arms of the teacher. The teacher just holds her while she cries. After a while of being held, she has had enough, and she wiggles out of the teacher's arms and runs back to the playground.

Our posture can be that nourishing supportive person who can hold the agitation we have. This takes the teacher in us, the adult in us, to be the one who holds the posture still enough and quiet enough so we can hold the deeper agitation and impulses, the tense, agitated energies that are there, so there's a container for them and there's nourishment for them. There's support for them so they can begin to relax and settle.

So physical calmness, physical tranquility. In the teachings of the Buddha, physical tranquility has a

wonderful kind of reciprocity with joy and happiness. Somehow, with tranquility there can be more happiness, and with happiness, more tranquility. With joy there can be more tranquility, with tranquility there can be more joy.

The state of tranquility is not one of apathy or indifference or holding yourself frozen. It's actually the opposite. Something comes alive when we can relax and open the body. Something can relax when we can open the wonderful, vital energies of calmness and clarity in our bodies.

May you become interested in the calmness of your body today. Perhaps you can also begin to understand how physical tranquility is a support for a kind of physical clarity, maybe even mental clarity. So look into and study your body today. Study the forces of agitation in your body and how you might support that agitation to calm down, to relax. Maybe some of you can reclaim your body from the agitation so that the calmness of your heart can have space to come forth. Thank you, and I hope you enjoy your day.