

Mindfulness of Breathing (13) Cultivating Tranquility

January 19, 2021

Summary Keywords

relax, tension, tranquility, body, relaxation, breathing, tranquilizing, meditation, mindfulness practice, serenity, concentration, body scan, holding, emotions, grasping, *ānāpānasati*, step four, bodily formation, Buddha, wise

Gil Fronsdal

The fourth step of *ānāpānasati* – mindfulness of breathing – is: "Breathing in, one trains oneself to relax the whole body, to calm the whole body." Actually, it doesn't say the whole body. It says:

Breathing in, one relaxes the bodily formations.

Breathing out, one relaxes the bodily formations.

I talked about this yesterday. The bodily formations are the constructs, activities, and tensions in the holding patterns of the body, which are the product of what we're doing with our minds, attitudes, thoughts, and reactions. We might also consider them to be the product of the emotions we are living by – fear, anger, joy, all kinds of emotions. They all have an impact. They're all manifested in our body.

If we hold onto any of this – if we cling to anything at all, resist, or hold at bay – that often gets translated into our body through tensions in our muscles. These can be micro-tensions or major tensions. As we let up on the holding, tension, resistance, grasping, and preoccupation with our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, the correlating tensions in the body begin to relax as well.

This generally happens on its own the more we sit and focus. Sometimes we can relax more deeply if we don't try to relax. Many times in meditation, I've felt some tension in my body, and I've actively tried to relax it to no avail. Then I give myself over to just being focused on breathing – putting aside any concern with the tension – and the concentration begins to kick in. Lo and behold, that part of my body will relax.

That's partly because with concentration on breathing, mental energy is no longer going into clinging, or holding on to something. It's just going into breathing, which is more neutral, and doesn't have so much clinging involved. So the energy goes away from the clinging and grasping in the mind. Then, as the grasping in the mind quiets down, the body relaxes as well.

That is what tends to happen. But in this wonderful fourth step of *ānāpānasati*, the instructions from the

Buddha are to spend some time relaxing the bodily formations – bringing tranquility into the system. It took me a while to appreciate this, because I started in Zen practice, and because of the way that I was taught *vipassanā* practice. Both of them were similar in that we were not supposed to be too actively involved in changing or doing something to our experience. We were mostly just supposed to be present for experience as it was. Any attempt to try to do something was considered extra – maybe even a symptom of greed, or attachment itself.

It took a while for me to learn that it's okay to spend some time relaxing and softening the body if you feel the tension there. The instructions from the Buddha are to actually take some agency in relaxing when we can. But relaxation can be overdone. Some people think that's the be-all and end-all of meditation – one just keeps relaxing and relaxing. But it can be detrimental to developing a strong sense of mindfulness and concentration.

We don't want to focus on relaxation and be in a hurry. Or be demanding, and expect to know right away the benefits of deep relaxation. That's why the first three steps of *ānāpānasati* do not have any instructions for relaxation at all. It's just simply to notice and be present for what's there. Experience what's there. That is a really powerful thing to do. The fact that these are the

first few steps doesn't mean that it's grade school meditation. Generally most meditators will spend a lot of time with the first two or three steps.

In the course of my career in meditating, I've probably spent more time on the first three steps than I have on all the rest of the steps put together. The idea is to spend a lot of time there, with really feeling and experiencing the body – experiencing the breathing.

Once it's well experienced and well recognized, then it makes sense to relax. It makes sense to relax and let go of something that is really well understood. We relax and let go to the degree that it is easy. We don't try to force the issue. Don't be upset if you can't. But if it's available, relax.

One thing you can do is a guided body scan, which I taught in the meditation. Systematically scan from the top of your head all the way through the body, feeling a different part of the body as you inhale. As you exhale: relaxing, softening, and tranquilizing that part of the body. Be content with even micro-relaxations. It doesn't have to be much. Just go through it. The body scan is also a concentration and mindfulness practice. We get a lot of benefits from going through it.

There are times when it's nice to begin with a body scan, especially if you sit for longer periods of time. To

really feel and sense what's here, and then maybe relax more deeply. At some point, you have to be content that for now, you're not going to relax any more than you're able to. So just settle in. Part of mindfulness practice is to learn to be accepting of tensions that don't go away. Just be willing to feel uncomfortable in parts of your body. Practice with that – not trying to make everything a project, and not expecting to get rid of every little discomfort that happens.

It's phenomenally important in mindfulness practice to learn to be present in an accepting and non-conflicted way with tension, discomfort, and everything that happens. If we constantly think we have to change and fix, we're going to shortchange ourselves out of the power of meditation.

But it's appropriate from time to time to relax – and to relax more and more deeply. The time to really focus on relaxing is not just because relaxation feels good and you'd like to relax to – but rather because you're so aware of your body. You're so present for it, as a result of doing the first three steps, that you can feel that you're on the edge between tension and relaxation. It's almost like you're at a tipping point: "Yes, I can feel or sense there's a possibility of relaxing just beyond the tension."

If you just feel tension and not the edge of the potential

for relaxing, maybe don't bother trying to relax. Maybe you're trying too much to do what can't be done. But take time to feel yourself on that edge. Don't be in a hurry to relax. See what happens – and then relax.

I think there's a biological feeling inside the whole system that wants to relax and release. This is partly because tension – the holding patterns – take a lot of work. It's tiring. Sooner or later, you'll feel like you just want to take a rest and relax – and stop all that work of tension. To feel that yearning, longing, and possibility for relaxation is one way to be wise about relaxation – so that you don't overdo it.

The Buddha said that the nourishment for tranquility is tranquility. In other words, what supports further relaxation is relaxation itself. When you relax, to feel, sense, and experience the tranquility and calmness that might be there. Appreciate and value that. If you think there are more important things to do than to value and be present for the calm that's there, then you'll miss the ways in which the calm nourishes and supports more contentment, tranquility, and serenity. So to begin appreciating tranquility, calm, serenity, and relaxation. It's a bit of a foretaste of the deeper release and letting go, which happens as we go along these 16 steps.

Over this next day, you might become a student of calm and tranquility. Notice the small and big ways it's

available to you. If you can, sit someplace in nature, or have tea in a nice chair, then try to see if you can tap into more tranquility, serenity, and calm over this next day.

Don't be so quick to succumb to agitation, or doing an activity that just keeps the mind spinning. See what you can learn from serenity, peace, and tranquility. As I said, one of the slogans of Buddhism is:

If you want to be wise, cultivate tranquility first.

Thank you, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.