

Satipaṭṭhāna (7) Relaxing the Body

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good day, everyone. We are going through the first exercise of the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*. It is a four-step exercise, which I tend to simplify into three steps. In meditation, we first become attuned and aligned with our breathing. We accompany the breath with our attention.

As you do so, become aware of the experience of breathing – whether you are breathing long or short breaths, deep or shallow, mostly breathing in the chest or in the belly. Savor and take in whatever sensations come into play – pressure, expansion, contraction, pulling. Register the richness of all the sensations of breathing as a way of getting centered on breathing,

developing continuity with the breath, and getting concentrated on breathing.

Then the instruction says:

Breathing in, experience the whole body.

Breathing out, experience the whole body.

Here, there is a kind of dual tracking. We are being aware of breathing and, at the same time, feeling the fullness of our experience of the body in whatever way it is easy to do. That does not have to be literally the whole body. For me, it has a lot to do with the torso because I give a lot of my attention to breathing there. I become aware of the fullness of the torso.

Over time, as we meditate, the body will speak. Different parts of the body will show themselves, usually through any discomfort. Over weeks, months, and years, different holding patterns in the body will reveal themselves as places that need attention.

Experiencing the whole body, we are also discovering what in the body needs attention now – and then breathing with it, breathing through it. Breathing has a wonderful way of helping us stay in the present moment. It protects us from easily wandering off into thought. At the same time, we are being present for what our lived experience is in our body, all of it.

Experiencing the whole body can be very healing. The body is not just a hunk of flesh. It is deeply connected to our minds. That relates to the last step of this first exercise in the sutta, which is:

Breathing in, relaxing the bodily formations.

Breathing out, relaxing the bodily formations.

I like to translate the word “formations” – *saṅkhāra* – as “constructions.” So relax the bodily construct. Bodily constructions are part of our embodied experience, which has somehow been constructed by the mind.

For example, if I am afraid and anxious, my shoulders can get tense. If I stay chronically anxious and my shoulders stay chronically tense, there might be times when I am not so anxious, but my shoulders are still locked. The tension I feel in my shoulders has been constructed or formed by what goes on in the mind. There is the emotion, the fear.

When the text says to relax the bodily formations or construct, this means to relax that part of the bodily experience that has been formed by our mental activity. If I have a desire – I really want something – and I am leaning forward, the physical sensations of leaning would be the physical formation.

The earlier step in the exercise is to feel the whole body and all the different ways the body shows itself. Now we

are becoming more interested in a subsection of the body – the part that has been shaped by the tensions, holding patterns, and emotions of the mind. This is where the practice is connecting the body and mind very intimately together. When we are relaxing the bodily formations, we are also, at the same time, relaxing the mental aspect that triggered them.

As people get tense in the body, there is a chicken and egg situation. At some point, the discomfort of the body being tense stimulates more thoughts and reactivity. If I feel tense in my shoulders and become afraid that people will judge me for having tense shoulders, I can get even tenser. Sometimes the genesis is the body and then the mind. At other times, it is the mind and then the body. And sometimes you may not quite know where it began because it is a chicken and egg situation.

But as we relax more deeply, we start seeing more clearly that things have a beginning. We can be attentive to this and freer. So we relax the body, but we do not become a puddle on the floor or the couch. The idea is to have a dynamic balance between physical alertness and relaxation.

When people are very tense, it is appropriate to focus on relaxation. It might be good to lie down on a bed or slump on a couch because that supports an ability to

relax. But in the long term, what we are looking for is dynamic relaxation, where we are also alert.

I don't know if this will speak to you. At the Tassajara monastery, there are natural hot springs with big hot baths you can soak in. The temperature is 105-106 degrees. It is a wonderful place to relax. When I first got to Tassajara, I loved to go to the baths. There was a bath hour every day. In the afternoon around five, you could go there, shower, clean up, and then soak in the hot baths. After a couple of months, I noticed that I would go in just for a minute to get warm and then get out and get dressed. I did that because it was cold in the winter.

I looked at myself and said: "Gil, what's going on with you? Are you too tense or uptight to enjoy the relaxation of the hot baths?" Eventually, I realized that in living the monastic life, where I was meditating quite a bit, the surface tension that I brought to the monastery had begun to release and fade away. When I first got to Tassajara, I loved the hot baths because they relaxed my surface tension. But as that surface tension dissipated, I did not need to soak in the hot baths for relaxation. I did not have that tension anymore.

There is an idea that relaxation is great. But relaxation that compensates for or reacts to the ways we get tense throughout the day is kind of an endless loop. We keep

getting tense and then relax. The idea is to relax deeply, understand some of the nature of being relaxed, and appreciate that state so we can start noticing when we are getting tense.

It is one thing to relax a little in meditation. However, you do not want to then forget about it, start running around, and be tense again so that you have to meditate to get relaxed. You want to learn from the relaxed state – learn from how you tense up – so that as you leave meditation, you do not quickly tense up again into old habits.

Slowly over time, there is a feedback loop. As we get less tense in daily life, meditation can go more deeply into levels of relaxation. This process allows meditation to not be compensatory – where we are only trying to compensate for the tension of the day, to relax, and get some relief. It allows us to have erectness, dynamism, an alert presence in the body – without feeling we are adding tension or work. It actually feels delightful and nice. Then there can be a balance between dynamism and deep relaxation. But that takes time.

This stage of the practice is to experience the whole body and then relax the bodily constructs. I suggest that whenever you can relax, in some way, the body or parts of the body, do not just go on to the next thing, like: “That’s done. That’s over.” Take a little time, maybe two

seconds, to relax and then appreciate the relief, release, and pleasure of whatever relaxation there is. Appreciate the lightness, openness, softness, and heightened sensitivity that might be there.

Lingering with that for a little while teaches us to be familiar with the state of relaxation so that we can support it more and more. It is also a time to let the relaxation be deeper. Let something deeper be experienced and registered, even if it is not so conscious.

Lingering also provides a little interruption or a pause. That certainly was the case for me when I was a beginning meditator. I was a little bit in a hurry in meditation. “Okay. I did that. Let me go to the next thing.” I was supposed to be a good meditator and do everything right. It was always the next thing. So take time, pause, and make room for just being. Just being.

Over the next twenty-four hours, I would recommend that you check in with your posture during meditation and daily life. See if you can have an alert posture, but don't slump to relax. Relax in an alert posture. That is an important foundation for meditation to go deeper.

If you are standing in line in a store, stand upright. Instead of reading the magazines at the checkout counter, close your eyes or look down quietly and then

connect to your body and relax. If you are in your car waiting at a red light, sit up a little in your seat, relax, soften your belly, and see what goes on. Whenever there is a little time – a pause in the day – see what it is like to relax. See what you learn and what happens in the ongoing experience of it.

I hope that enriches your day, and you enjoy it. We will continue tomorrow. Thank you.