

Practice Note: Relaxing the Body to Help Being Present

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on August 24, 2011

The entry point from which mindfulness practice grows is our ability to notice what's happening in the present moment. If you join that with a capacity to be concentrated so that you're really focused on the present moment in some penetrating way, then you get the most out of mindfulness practice. While different things are useful at different times in supporting our ability to be present and concentrated, perhaps the single most useful thing is to relax.

Generally the forces that take us out of the present moment can be characterized as not being completely relaxed. Forces such as agitation, concerns, pressure and tension propel the mind to be concerned with other times, other places, and other things. The way the mind is caught up in its concerns, relationships and reactions to what goes on around us is often expressed in our body. Different muscles in the stomach, chest, shoulders, back, legs, hands, in the face, and around the eyes tighten and tense up.

One of the things you might consider as you practice today is that when you find yourself not in the present moment as fully as you'd like to be, scan through your physical and psychological system to see if there are ways in which something can relax and soften. And see if that helps you to be more present. It's a little bit of a trick, because as soon as you focus on what's being held or where the tension is, you're in the present moment. If you've been focusing on relaxing, you're still in the present moment.

Relaxing creates good conditions for being able to be present and concentrated. It's an antidote to the tendency some people have of trying harder and tightening up in order to be present. It may seem counterintuitive that what's needed is to relax. But you might soften and relax, and see if that's a greater entryway to being present.

It's fascinating to look through the body. The way we hold tension in our body can be very subtle – not just in big muscular groups, but very subtly around the jaw, cheeks, eyes, nose, and fingers. So go through the body and see where you can relax and soften. In doing that, the physical body becomes a more comfortable place within which to do the practice. Unless you fall asleep, the more comfortable the body is, the easier it is to be present because it's nicer to be present if it's comfortable.

So see if relaxation can help you with being present today. Thank you.