

Practice Note: Relaxing During Meditation

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on December 21, 2011

The mindfulness practice described in the Buddha's most ancient text on mindfulness, the "Four Foundations of Mindfulness," begins with mindfulness of breathing. It's a way of starting. The instructions say to focus on your breathing. At first, just get to know it; get familiar with your experience, and be with it.

Then, to paraphrase of course, it says to relax: "Focus on your breath and relax." It actually says to tranquilize, quiet, or relax your "bodily formations." Bodily formations are those parts of your physical experience that arise because of what your mind has done. For example, if you've been running around frantically for the holiday season and your stomach is in knots, that is called a "bodily formation" – the activity of your mind feeling frantic expresses itself as intention, energy, or emotions in your body. There is such a strong connection between what we do in the mind and the body, that there are a lot of remnants or traces of our mental activity and emotions in how we hold ourselves in our tensions and posture.

So, part of the very simple exercise of being with the breath is to also begin relaxing and softening that. You can't do it adamantly because then you'll get tense. You want to just gently let yourself relax, settle in, notice where there might be holding or tension in the body, and relax and soften. Be with your breath. Come back to your breath.

If there's holding or tension, I find it particularly useful to soften on the exhale. I like the word 'soften' instead of 'relax' because sometimes you can't really relax. You know the tension is held somehow, but maybe you can soften around the way you hold it, or relate to it – softening the attitude a little bit, rather than making an actual, physical change.

So, as you sit here today, and as you meditate through these holidays, you might want to remember that it's very helpful at the beginning to include relaxation as part of the practice. Then at some point, you might be relaxed enough that any further emphasis on relaxation is counterproductive. You'll probably just fall asleep, or be too complacent. But, at the beginning, it's a wonderful thing to do.

May you have a relaxed, wonderful holiday season. Thank you.