

Mindfulness of Breathing (12) Relaxation and the Fourth Step

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body, breathing, relax, meditation, tensions, sensations, mind, calm, tranquilize, breathe, experience, mindfulness, doer, *ānāpānasati*, first tetrad, fourth step, bodily formation, chest, belly, mind state, preference, global body

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As we continue exploring the Buddha's teachings on mindfulness of breathing, I want to introduce the fourth step of the first tetrad of *ānāpānasati* – the sixteen steps of breathing in mindfully and breathing out mindfully. In the fourth step, one trains oneself experiencing the whole body, and one relaxes the whole body. One trains oneself to relax the whole body.

A few things about this – to relax or to calm. Many translations use the word 'tranquilize' – "One tranquilizes the body." The word 'tranquilize' may have some unfortunate connotations in English, unlike "to calm or to relax." When step four talks about relaxing the whole body, it doesn't really say it that way. It says, "One relaxes the bodily formations" – the bodily constructions, the ways in which the body has come into play based on the activities of the mind.

One relaxes the physical manifestations of our mental state or mental activities. Certainly we can feel that in breathing. We get excited and the breathing may get more shallow – with more chest breathing rather than belly breathing – or faster. Then we relax more. We're not so excited. We calm down, and the breathing shifts and changes. In Buddhism, the excitement that we feel in the breathing – expressed in the breathing – is called "bodily formations." The word 'formation' or 'construction' refers to what has been created or what comes into play by the state of mind we have.

Much of what we experience in our bodies day-to-day is surprisingly a manifestation of something about how the mind is. That state of the mind – the qualities, activities, preferences, and selection processes of the mind – whatever the mind is involved in, has a big impact on how we experience our body and how our body gets activated.

This activation of the body is what we then relax. This is a very nice part of mindfulness of breathing practice. Here is where we have some agency. We have some involvement with what we relax, soften, or actively tranquilize – to calm the body down. As you know, I often teach at the beginning of a meditation to feel the breathing, and then with the exhale, relax the body. This is an expression of the instructions of the Buddha.

In the Buddha's classic instructions, relaxing the body is step four. I interpret this to mean, "Don't be in a hurry to get too actively involved in relaxing the tensions and activities of the body. Take your time with it." A lot of the relaxing that comes with meditation just comes from sitting still, being quiet, getting concentrated, and letting go of your thoughts. The body itself settles down and gets calm. You don't have to be the doer of it.

In fact, to be too much the doer – the one who's making it happen and is responsible for it – can actually lead to tension. It can also be a dead end for the purpose of meditation. To really be able to go deep into meditation, we have to learn also how to relax the agency – relax the doer – the one who wants it differently, tries to make something different happen, and fixes things. It's best not to try to fix anything in meditation. It's better to just be and breathe with things.

The Buddha's instructions on relaxing the body – the bodily activity formations – is step four. It's really good to take your time with the first three steps. Take the time to simply recognize the experience of breathing. What are the sensations there? If it's a long breath, note that it's a long breath. If it's a short breath, note that it's a short breath. Take note of all of the different ways in which breathing is experienced.

Then, after we do that – partly so we get concentrated and feel like we're more in the flow of the present moment – we open up the awareness to experience more fully and globally the experience of breathing. The first global experience of breathing is the full breath body – the full experience of breathing.

It can be the full experience of breathing through time – the continuity of just staying with one in-breath, the next out-breath, the next in-breath. Just staying and staying.

The other fullness is throughout the breath body – the full range of ways in which breathing impacts and affects the body. To feel the rhythm and impact in the body: in the back and front of the ribcage, shoulders, belly – wherever it might be that you feel it. Or feel the radiance from that. Sometimes there's a glow, a radiant sort of warmth, a tingling, or vibration that seems to spread beyond the normal boundaries of what we experience as breathing. We start to feel a wider glow of goodness or pleasure that might be there.

To feel the whole body – the global body – also means to feel the wider context of your whole physical body and breathe feeling all that. If particular parts of your body have strong sensations unconnected to breathing, stay with your breathing and breathe with those strong sensations. If your knee hurts, breathe with the pain in your knee. Accompany it with your breathing. Breathe through it.

All this is getting to know the sensations of your breathing more and more deeply. We learn to open the awareness up over time to support that natural global awareness. This tends to come as we get more focused.

After doing that for quite some time, we might be ready to do the fourth step, which is a much deeper letting go. Now there's not so much the self involved. There's not so much trying to escape discomfort, or trying to make ourselves better – or other kinds of self-centered, self-preoccupied ways of practicing.

Because we feel deeply, we start feeling the natural movement of the body to relax. It's the body's deepest request. The body's request is to be at peace, to be calm – to not always have to carry or live with the tensions of daily life concerns, fears, anxieties, desires, or hostilities. All these are things that we carry in our body. The body wants to have a break. The directionality of the body is towards release – relaxing, being settled, and being calm. The body settles by itself.

It's remarkable to be with someone who has just died. You can sometimes see their face completely relaxed in a way that it wasn't when they were alive. In life, their face carried so much of the tension of daily life unconsciously. It may not be so obvious until you see it: "Oh, *that's* what a relaxed face is like."

The direction the body wants to go is towards relaxation – not holding on tight. We can feel that – I call it a longing or request. We can feel the possibility contained in the body: it wants to relax. It wants to settle.

We want to wait. We don't always want to be relaxing in meditation. We want to do the basic breath meditation – staying with the breath, feeling the body, settling in, and letting the mind become quieter and quieter. With that quiet mind and a somewhat settled body, you might feel something subtle, quiet, like a little whisper. That is the potential, the movement, the edge where the body wants to settle even more – to relax. Then really let go – soften. As you exhale, let go, let go, and let go. It's a wonderful thing when deep, deep release happens in your body.

We'll spend a couple of days on relaxing and releasing the body – the fourth step of *ānāpānasati*. It continues to be part of the whole aspect of mindfulness of breathing that is centered on the body. Really getting to know the body well and more and more deeply – learning to read, sense, and feel the body.

During these days when we're still really centered on the body, I encourage you over the next twenty-four hours to spend more time feeling your body. Become intimate with your body – the sensations of your body, your postural positions, the breathing in your body. Make a full study of it. Appreciate and value your body and what's going on.

Operate at the speed of mindfulness of the body. Be careful you don't spend too much of the day with the mind going faster than your ability to stay grounded in your body. See what that's like. See what is evoked for you in that context.

Thank you very much.