

Practice Note: Working with Tension

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 1, 2010

I wanted to say something this morning about practicing with tension. I think most people carry some tension in their bodies, in their minds. Some people a lot more than others. It's interesting, with your attention, to single out the tension you feel, whether it's in the shoulders, the stomach, the jaw, the forehead, or anywhere – the breathing, the rib cage. It's certainly helpful to identify it and then to relax, to soften it, easy.

One of the great ways to relax, sometimes, is to feel in touch with the place of tension and then as you breathe, imagine you're breathing through it, or breathing with that place. And then as you exhale, just letting go and relaxing with the exhale. Just send a wave of relaxation, or intention, to soften that place. Sometimes it's easy to do it, and sometimes it's not so easy. But when it's not easy, that's when it's most interesting – to just stay there without a big agenda. Just stay and be in touch with, be present for the place of tension, and then just breathe gently. Just keep breathing, breathing with the tension, with the holding you have. And if, after a while, it doesn't let go easily, then let go of any intention or desire to have it go away. Just stay with the tension in a very relaxed, open way. Just feel it and just breathe. Perhaps you can imagine that the breath moves into that space and expands it as you breathe in, and then relaxes as you breathe out. Just do that – it might be for a long time – but just stay with it.

Sometimes as you do that, you can become aware of the connection between the tension and certain feelings, or tension and certain thoughts that are going on. It's interesting to watch and see if there are certain patterns of thinking going on that might, in some subtle way, be reinforcing, or keeping, or creating, the tension itself. Or there might be certain emotions that are in the background fueling that tension. It might not be evident at first, but as you gently stay there, you just stay and hang out, and try to stay with the breath as best you can – but breathing through, breathing with the place of tension – very generously, spaciously, without any agenda.

Do it for a long period of time – that's what it takes. Stay, stay, stay there and then see what gets revealed as you do that. Just hang out. Discover. It's a very interesting thing to do.

It's also possible to do it in walking meditation, to some degree. It's much easier, I think, to do it in sitting meditation, at least for me. In walking meditation, the idea is to set a steady, easy, relaxed pace as you walk, and then hold to it. In walking meditation, the tension you carry might play out to take you away from the easy, steady connection to your pace. As you feel that how it pulls you away from that pace, in a variety of ways, and then see if you can come back to the pace. Come back.

I hope that's helpful for you, those of you who might just happen to have some tension.