

Dharmette: Why Be Tense?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on February 6, 2013

I have something a little different for you today. Rather than giving a talk, I have a question for you. Can you convince me that it is important to be tense [laughter]? What are the really good arguments for why you shouldn't really be relaxed? I suspect that some of you are not always relaxed. Some of you occasionally get tense and just go along as if that's the way it should be. You must have good reasons. Not only do I want to hear the good reasons, I want to hear you convince me because maybe I need to improve. Maybe I am missing out on an important part of life.

Participant 1: *Because I am under attack and I need to protect myself. The more tense I am, the more I can invest in that.*

That doesn't convince me very much because I go to my ten-year-old son's aikido class and I see them teach the kids that you respond to attack so much better when you are relaxed. But thank you for offering that.

Participant 2: *If you are too relaxed, you will forget to do something that is really important.*

Oh, I see. But I have been really tense in the distant past and forgotten what I had to do. Sometimes I remembered what I had to do, but then I didn't notice the really important things. So that doesn't quite do it.

Participant 3: *Well, when I am tense, it gives me the opportunity to see what is making me tense.*

Ahh. That's interesting. So I should be more tense so that I can learn why I am being tense?

Participant 3: *When I am tense, it gives me the opportunity to see what is happening with me. Since I am tense a lot, it gives me a chance to see what the tension is about.*

Ahh. If you are going to be tense anyway, then it is important so that you can study it. Get to know it. Don't be quick to overcome it. Oh, I like that. But it doesn't convince me to lose my relaxation. But next time I get tense, I will remember that.

Participant 4: *The feeling of tension also allows you to know what it is like not to have tension. If you never felt tension, how would you know what relaxation is?*

[Laughs.] Would you need to know?

Participant 4: *You might. If you are always relaxed, will you even know you are relaxed? I think I need to know.*

That doesn't convince me that I have to let go of my relaxed state.

Participant 5: *Do you remember isometrics? It is a way of strengthening your muscles. You hold them really tight and then let them go. So that is a reason to be tense. You are strengthening your muscles.*

Oh. The next time I go to the gym, I will remember this. So now we are talking about physical tension for the purpose of physical improvement. Tense for that purpose. Ok.

Participant 6: *I have a close friend in New York where I grew up. He claims that everybody out*

here is stupid. That if you relax too much you will get run over by a car in the street.

That sounds like people are confusing being relaxed with being stupid, and I don't see that connection. I see that some of the most wonderful insights of my life have come not when I was tense, but when I was relaxed. I have needed to be relaxed. Maybe I have been a little tense in working on a project, but then I go for a long walk and during that walk I relax and something pops up, a new understanding. I don't know if I would want to give up being relaxed for some promise of being more intelligent if I were tense. Tense and unhappy instead of relaxed.

Participant 7: *I am drowsily relaxed and I am crossing the street. I look up and see that I am about to be hit by a truck. Then I experience instantaneous tension which will help me spring out of its way.*

But that is not tension you are doing by choosing. That is instinct operating. You are not thinking ahead that this is a good time to be tense. You don't have time to make that choice. I am looking for a choice about why I should give up my relaxation.

Participant 8: *If you want to be completely single-focused, rigid, contracted, unaware of your surroundings, unable to see others' needs, then I think tension is really good.*

[Laughter.] And when do I want to be completely rigid, unaware of my surroundings and unconnected? And not knowing what I'm feeling or thinking? Is there a time for that?

Participant 8: *I don't want to do that myself, but I am just posing an argument.*

Oh, I see. One of the things I was thinking about for a talk was there is always a time for something. It's not always one way. Maybe what you are saying is sometimes appropriate.

Participant 9: *I have two ideas. If you are about to be physically hit, like a boxer who wants to strengthen the abs to protect the organs, you want to tighten that part of your body. And when kids are little and things are so emotionally traumatic, they want to go away so that they won't be emotionally overwhelmed. It's a way of protecting ourselves, coping; otherwise there might be physical or emotional harm.*

The idea is that with trauma or abuse, sometimes tightening up or being tense is a way of protecting oneself. It still doesn't convince me that I should get tense, unless you are planning to beat me up [laughs].

Participant 10: *This is probably a typical philosophy scenario. I am in a well-paid psychological experiment, where they are going to test me for the effects of tension on my physiological self, so I have good reason to be tense.*

Oh, I see. And how much are you paying me? I will consider it for the right price. I'll have a little tension.

Participant 11: *Someone comes to see you and they are feeling so different and alone, aching to know that they are not the only one feeling tension. They want empathy. They need to know they are not alone in the universe – the single most intense person. They want to know that you as the teacher have also experienced something like that.*

So you are going to show them some tension. So you are going to muster some up. Well, it is one thing that in the past there was lots of tension. But you are telling me that it's a reason to get tense now? Muster it so that they can feel met and seen, and then maybe they can relax because we are all in this boat together. OK, I kind of like that. Sometimes teachers will change how they sit in order to meet a person. If the person is sitting upright, then the teacher will sit that way in order to meet them there. If a person comes in and slouches, then sometimes the teacher will sit

back. Maybe.

Participant 12: *My tension helps me to revisit my childhood because my mother was a very hard taskmaster. I go back and I recall that. It helps me to understand my tension. And then, thank goodness, because of the things I do now, I am able to relax more.*

I see. So when you do get tense, it's kind of like what someone said earlier about getting tense, it helps you to understand the roots of the tension by remembering what happened to you when you were a child. It helps you then to be more relaxed in the future.

Participant 12: *I get in touch with that.*

So have you intentionally made yourself tense so that you can revisit the past?

Participant 12: *No, the tension just happens.*

And then you look at it. Great. So it is not a reason to give up your relaxed state, but the idea is that when you do get tense, it is an opportune time to look more deeply. One of the things that help you is that it resonates with your history and your childhood. Seeing that has helped you to understand the roots.

Participant 13: *Seeing tension when it arises, either in thinking or in the body, to be aware of it, and then when it goes, seeing the release. You may not invite tension, but if you don't acknowledge it and truly see it, then there is no real seeing when the release happens.*

So this is similar to the others. If it's already there, already present, then it is useful to get to know it, to look at it, and then you can see the release and the difference. I like this point of view.

But what I was particularly interested in was if you are somewhat relaxed already, why would you give it up? Why would you take on tension if you don't have to? What are the justifications or beliefs for that? I appreciate what everybody said.

I think that when you find yourself tense, it is a useful exercise to consider what you are believing. I think that behind every tension (it might not be conscious) is a belief that getting tense is meaningful and important – that you are better off being tense, or that somehow you are taking care of yourself better. Otherwise, why would we do it? What if we question the beliefs behind the tension? I think that it never occurs to many people to do that.

What I hoped by asking the question today and getting your wonderful answers is that you will be encouraged to question more deeply and to understand what is going on for you. What might cause you to sacrifice your ease, your well-being?