

Mindfulness of Breathing (34) Tranquility and Liberation

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Summary Keywords

tranquility, relaxation, liberation, tranquil, calm, freedom, relaxing, releasing, *ānāpānasati*

Gil Fronsdal

The sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing are organized in groups of four called tetrads. The instructions for the last step of each tetrad have to do with something in the family of letting go, freedom, and release – whatever language you prefer.

Step four is: "calming the bodily formations." It's sometimes translated as 'tranquilizing.' I love the word 'tranquil,' but 'tranquilizing' is often associated with treating animals. 'Tranquilizing' doesn't evoke a positive response for me – the sense of bringing about tranquility in the body.

In the eighth step, the task is to calm, relax, tranquilize the mental formations – the mind. The twelfth step, which we'll come to in a while, is freedom – releasing the mind, freeing the mind. The sixteenth and final step of *ānāpānasati* is relinquishment. Relinquishment may be a big word that doesn't really inspire us– but it involves a real, qualitative, and transformative experience of freedom: liberation.

The movement toward greater freedom begins with simply relaxing the body. It's beginning to learn the lesson of freedom. It's beginning to have a reference point for the goodness of not being tense or caught. For many people, physical relaxation is more accessible than full-blown liberation. We're beginning to get a taste of freedom, an embodied taste of liberation.

Most people don't associate simple physical relaxation with Buddhist liberation. But liberation is kind of a matter-of-fact thing. The greater our liberation, the more we see it as not such an unusual or otherworldly thing. It's a profound experience of beginning to relax the body and experience physical tranquility.

Those of you who've been following along know that I often emphasize relaxing at the beginning of meditation. 'Relaxing' may be too limited a word to describe the sense of tranquility that can come as we continue deeply into *ānāpānasati*. But looking for the tranquility, calmness, or serenity that can exist in our practice is said to be a support for greater tranquility. We're not making calmness or tranquility the be-all and end-all. But rather, it's a wonderful foundation for beginning to soften the hardness of the heart and mind.

When we're stuck and things don't move, tranquility begins to create a sense of inner safety, where things begin to release more and more. I like the word 'tranquility' more than the word 'calmness' because 'calmness' can lend itself to the idea of becoming too calm – so calm you fall asleep. Tranquility implies not just calm, but also alertness, harmonious energy – a calm, tranquil aliveness that can be here in an embodied way.

I say all this to encourage you to begin appreciating the influence of relaxation. As you go about your daily life, see if there are times when you notice your shoulders or your belly relax. Notice this as you sit down at the end of a long day. You've finally set down all your preoccupations, drive, and momentum, and you feel more relaxed. See if you can appreciate the influence of this on you.

See if you can touch into the initial feelings of a certain kind of freedom or release – of no longer being limited, bound, or caught. Feel what that's like physically. Begin to appreciate the small movements of freedom that can be here.

As you get the hang of it, you might find many small movements of freedom – little movements of not being caught – are happening. These are often easy to overlook because they're not particularly valued. Other things,

such as getting something done, might seem more valuable. But there might be a lot of little movements of: "Oh, that's great."

You might step out of your house after a rainstorm. The rain has passed and the sun has come out. Something inside of you releases in that feeling of being outdoors in the sun and the fresh air. What does that influence in you? What does that affect in your body? Appreciate it.

Don't hang onto it. Don't get too complicated around it. But begin feeling little movements of freedom, release, relaxation, tranquility, and peacefulness that may emanate from moments of relaxation and ease.

The more we start recognizing this in meditation, and at different times in daily life, the more it reinforces that movement. It reinforces the value of not being tense. It reinforces the value of not being caught up in preoccupations, drive, bracing ourselves against things, closing down, or trying to run away from things. It begins to question those movements of the mind, which are the opposite of freedom.

Do that in the small areas of your life. Ordinary things are wonderful stepping stones. They support us in going deeper and further along – until the deeper areas of letting go, the freedom that *ānāpānasati* is taking us to – become more natural, accessible, and understandable. And this will be because of what we've taken in earlier in the practice – not just in meditation, but at other times as well.

If you really want to go more and more deeply into *ānāpānasati*, this movement toward freedom can become an ongoing sensitivity and attention in the heart. We are not self-preoccupied. I hope you don't think it's selfish. Freedom is beginning to turn us inside out. In this freedom, we become more easily and naturally sensitive and caring for the world around us.

Tranquility, letting go, release, relaxation, and calm are all part of the family of experiences and movements connected to liberation. Become a connoisseur of this. Become sensitive to it. Be informed and inspired by it. Be regularly in touch with this calm, so that it becomes a habit that grows and develops in you.

May this practice lead you to greater and greater experiences of freedom. And in so doing, may it be for your delight!

Thank you so much for today, and we'll continue this tomorrow.