

# Mindfulness of Breathing (37) Skilled in Tension to be Free of Tension

February 20, 2021

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

relax, calm, tension, agitation, mind, *ānāpānasati*, tense, fixated, clinging, relaxation, tranquility, protection, intentness

**Gil Fronsdal**

When doing this Buddhist path and meditation practice, it's certainly helpful to relax. To calm the over-activated places, and to relax the overly tense places. To bring tranquility to the ways in which we're anxious or agitated. Sometimes the emphasis is on relaxation or calming.

An important skill to develop on this path of practice is a heightened sensitivity to tension, agitation, and the ways in which we get tense. We want to become skilled at being able to recognize it clearly so that we pick up on it early as it begins. Or so that we become aware of the subtle ways in which we get caught and cling. If we're focusing only on relaxation and calm, we might not become experts at perceiving tension.

Most of the tensions we feel in the body probably represent some way in which the mind is clinging to something. The mind is fixated on something, pushing on something. Much of our physical tension represents something deeper in the mind. The surface tensions of the mind we might feel when we're really anxious, upset, or tense also probably represent something deeper in the mind, some deeper place of holding or attachment. Even though we may be talking about physical relaxation, what we're relaxing is something that has its source deep in the clinging of the mind.

The idea is to start becoming more sensitive when we're clinging to tension. This has many benefits. One is that it can help us go further and deeper into practice – because we've gotten used to, and familiar with, all the little ways that clinging appears in our body, mind, and heart.

It's also a protection for ourselves and our practice because it's very easy to practice with tension and attachment we don't see. A person can receive the instructions: "Just relax your tension." They get so serious about relaxing that paradoxically they tense up around: "Let's really do it well here. The teacher says to relax and, by golly, I'm going to relax. I'm going to be the best relaxer anywhere." And then we relax. Certainly, we partly relax the body, but the mind has gotten tense in the effort.

We can become attached to instructions we receive in practice. We can get attached to ideas of what might happen in practice, – wanting something to happen. Or we become attached somehow to a negative clinging: "Oh, that's not happening to me. It's not possible for me. That doesn't relate to me." Or, "That's not right." The tension is holding on to that in a way that limits our freedom.

If we start becoming skilled at recognizing tension, then we see the very tension involved in how we practice – what we're looking for and wanting to have happen in practice. So it becomes a protection when we're not ahead of ourselves in practice. That we're not trying to make something happen, or expecting something to occur, which is not actually what *is* happening. The default is always to come back to what is happening.

In doing that, we recognize how we're tense – the pushing, striving, or contraction that might be there. As we let go of it, that has an influence on us. Part of the deeper recognition of tension is that we can comprehend what is not tension. We can recognize the impact it has on us to let go, soften, and relax. We can recognize that there's more happening here than tension.

I've certainly had the experience of being overly concerned with tension in my body and mind or something I was supposed to do – like paying attention to the breathing. So much so that I didn't notice the wider picture of what was going on – that there was, in fact, some settledness, calm, and peacefulness. Actually, there was a very subtle kind of delight in just being here. But I was so fixated and concerned with my preoccupation.

Relaxing and opening the attention to feel the influence of tranquility allows us to feel some of the other goodness that's here – some of the other things that are actually going well for us.

As *ānāpānasati* deepens, we broaden the attention to take in the bigger picture of what's happening. There's joy and contentment that permeate the bigger picture. It might be subtle and not dramatic. We might then get fixated or attached to having joy and happiness – or being disappointed if we don't have it. And that's tension.

If we are skilled at looking at tension, then we'll catch it right away so it doesn't trip us up: "Oh, there's tension!" Maybe rather than looking for joy, we should spend time feeling tension. Then we can relax, soften, or not be limited by the tension. We can open up the attention wider – not in a fixated way – but in an open, relaxed way.

As we open, if we do feel some of the goodness of the relaxation and the practice that's occurring, I think of it as feeling the mood of a room, or the atmosphere of a situation we're in. I've gone into some places and the atmosphere is clearly peaceful. I feel like I'm being washed in peacefulness. In other atmospheres, the whole thing just feels very tense.

There's a kind of atmosphere within us. Take in the atmosphere of the good, even if it's subtle, and breathe with that. Not to deny other things or lose our ability to notice when we get tense, tight, contracted, or resistant – all the different expressions of clinging – but as a way of creating a nice atmosphere that supports the further letting go of clinging.

This gives us confidence and some sense of the rightness of the moment – as opposed to focusing on the wrongness of the moment. Some people are real experts at this. This is not to have a Pollyannaish view that everything is good. Rather it's to create an atmosphere that allows us to hold, and be with the difficulties in a way that we don't get fixated, cling, or resist them too tightly.

All this is a way of saying that part of what we are doing in this practice is becoming an expert on tension. While the emphasis might be on relaxing, don't become tense because you're trying to relax, or because you can't relax. Keep remembering that recognizing and learning to feel, sense, and become more of a connoisseur of all the different flavors and textures of tension, clinging, holding, and attachment is actually a very important part of the practice.

Take some time to feel and get to know the tension. Do not be in a hurry to relax or get rid of anything that's uncomfortable. The lesson you learn by really feeling it fully is how to be better prepared for the next time – how to catch it earlier and protect yourself from being caught in it.

Part of the Buddhist path is to become skilled in tension. It is not to become skilled in tensing. We don't want to learn how to get tense better, but rather how to become skilled in recognizing tension and seeing when it's beginning.

The last thing I'll say about this is the importance of not confusing tension with intent. Sometimes being intent has a certain energy, engagement, and wholeheartedness that doesn't have the quality of limitation or debilitation that tension or clinging has – but it's really present. There can be intentness of the body and intentness of the mind. "I'm here, this is what I'm doing. I'm involved in this" – but there's no tension. There may be tautness, but no contraction. Sometimes people hear 'relax,' and they relax their intentness. They relax their healthy tautness and move towards becoming a slouch. They become too limp to really let the vitality of practice operate.

Relaxing, calming, becoming tranquil, and peaceful are supports for this practice. But don't overlook the important work of becoming skilled at recognizing tension.

Maybe take some delight and satisfaction in becoming a connoisseur of all the different ways that you're tense. Rather than being disappointed when you see it, you say, "Oh, fantastic! I get to study this, and get to know it better. The tension is not so pleasant right now. But, in the long term, I'm much better off really becoming a student of tension before I focus too much on relaxing."

On Monday, we'll continue with step nine of *ānāpānasati*. Thank you.