

Body (1 of 5) Relaxing the Body

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This week, the focus is on the part of mindfulness instructions that have to do with mindfulness of the body. Mindfulness of the body practice begins with mindfulness of breathing, which was the focus of last week. Breathing is a completely embodied part of our experience. It opens us to the rest of the body.

The simplest instruction for mindfulness that we teach here at IMC is to use the breathing as the basis – as the home base, the default – for meditation. If you are wondering where to place your attention, place it on your breathing.

If something else becomes more compelling or predominant, there are two options. You can either let go of the breathing entirely and bring your full attention to this other thing that's predominant. For now, the other thing is going to be the body. If something becomes more predominant in the body, then we practice mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of that place in the body. The other option is to stay with the breathing and use your imagination to breathe through or with the strong sensations in your body.

Sooner or later, the body will speak up with strong sensations. For beginners in meditation, taking a meditation posture can quickly become uncomfortable. Slowly over time, the body adjusts and stretches. It opens and gets stronger so that there's some ease in this yogic posture of meditation. It's well worth it to work through that time.

You don't need to strain yourself meditating. You don't have to force yourself to stay with the discomfort. If some discomfort becomes too strong, then change your posture. If you're getting stressed by the meditation itself, then don't stay with uncomfortable things. There's also a turning toward what's in the body.

Today's topic is relaxation; to relax the body in a deep way.

I started learning the value of relaxation when I was a Zen student. There were times that my knees hurt a lot from sitting. We meditated a lot, and in Zen, you weren't supposed to move while you were meditating. So, if you were uncomfortable, you'd have to bear it.

I noticed at some point that there would be subtle micro-tensions in the muscles around the knee pain. It was an expression of resistance to the pain, and I'd contract around it. But that tightness actually made the pain worse. If I relaxed those micro-tensions, the pain lessened and got better. It was just enough better that there was a difference from being overwhelmed to managing fine with it.

But I had to be very attentive because if I didn't pay attention, the reactivity would creep in unknowingly, and the muscles would be tight again. So, I learned to stay there, feel the sensations of tightness and relax them.

I also learned that sometimes I had subtle tension in my fingers. They were ever so slightly pulled in. The tension was an expression of an attitude – “I have to work hard here; I have to engage in doing this meditation thing.” I learned to recognize that subtle tension in the fingers, relax it, and keep it relaxed. Relaxing had a reciprocal relationship to that attitude – “I have to work hard here.” As I relaxed the fingers, that attitude would soften. Unknowingly, the attitude would return, and the fingers would get tense again. I learned to regularly check in and make sure my fingers were relaxed as part of meditation practice. This micro-relaxation was relatively easy for me to do. It wasn't a big deal.

Same thing with the belly. In the early years of meditation practice, I had a lot of tension in my belly; it was always tightened up and held in. I didn't make it a big project, but probably two or three times during meditation, in the beginning, middle, and near the end, I would relax the belly. Oftentimes, in the beginning, it would tighten right up again. I didn't make much to do about it; I just periodically relaxed.

Over months of doing this, the belly learned what it was like to be relaxed. As the belly became more familiar with relaxation, it was easier to have a relaxed belly. Also, the anxiety that seemed to be the genesis of that stomach tension began to loosen. I began to recognize the anxiety. I hadn't recognized it until I started hanging out with the belly and feeling the tension there.

As you do mindfulness of the body, it's helpful to keep an eye out for where the tension, the tightness, and the holding patterns are. Not to make it a big project or be very ambitious about relaxation, but it is helpful to relax.

As many of you know from these 7 am meditation sessions, I always teach to relax at the beginning. Always relax at the beginning. But as the meditation goes along, it's useful to check in: "Is there some tension there? Has any tension crept in?"

In some of my longest retreats, where I sat in very deep states of meditation for a few hours at a time, I developed a practice of pulling myself out of the concentrated state and checking for a few seconds to see if any tension had crept in. If there was tension, then I would relax it.

Often there was tension in the upper head that was connected to trying a little bit too hard to be focused and get concentrated. There'd be a little contraction there, so I'd relax. With the relaxation, the contraction softened. Then I would dip back into the deep place of meditation. I found it useful to always come out and check. Some people, as they get concentrated, they get tension in their face. If you do, come out of the concentrated state, relax the tension, and then see if you can get concentrated without that tension building up.

Some people find that even if they don't try to do a lot of relaxation actively, meditation itself is relaxing. The genesis of a lot of tension has to do with the tense way we think and the tense things we think about. In meditation, as the thinking quiets down, that source of tension begins to lessen and become weaker and weaker.

Some people find that by simply staying with the breath, focusing on the breath, letting their attention ride the breath, and be with it, there's not so much attention available to the thinking that is stress-producing. People find themselves relaxing progressively. Sometimes they realize after the fact, "Boy, am I relaxed," without trying.

It's also important not to try too much to relax. There were times when I tried to relax my body. I made it a project, and I couldn't quite do it. I'd do a little relaxing, and I'd try some more, and then a little more relaxing, and it just kept me busy in meditation. So, then I wouldn't try to relax. I would just stay focused, be with my breathing, and get concentrated on my breathing. And lo and behold, that part of my body relaxed. We don't always want to do a frontal assault on our attention. Sometimes we have to accept the tension and allow it to be there. And just do the practice and trust that it'll relax on its own.

Finally, if you feel tension somewhere in the body that doesn't want to relax, don't worry about it. But sometimes it's very interesting to relax *around it*. Relax the attitude towards it. Relax the outer layer of reactivity around it, like the knee pain I used to tighten up around.

If the shoulders or the belly is tense and won't relax, don't worry about it. But maybe it's possible to relax a little bit wider circle in the body. Just around the spot, there might be a softening that can happen.

So, today's theme is relaxation. I think of relaxation as an entry-level taste of the deep letting go that in Buddhism is called liberation. Relaxation shares some of the goodness and qualities of deep freedom and liberation that comes. It's like we're getting the hang of it or feel for it; the body gets a sense of it. It helps prepare the ground for deeper and deeper letting go and relaxation as meditation proceeds.

Thank you for today. You might spend the next 24 hours familiarizing yourself with the tensions in your body and the times, places, and ways you tighten up. It may be fascinating to see how much tension goes on for you. Also, are there simple ways you can relax that? What happens if you don't allow the tension to build? How does that affect your day?

So, thank you very much.