

# Mindfulness of Mind (1 of 5) Responsible For Tension

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## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

attention, windshield, attitude, reactions, anger, relax, relaxation

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Today we start the week on mindfulness of the mind. These last four weeks we have been exploring the basic instructions for mindfulness meditation that we teach here at IMC. First, there was mindfulness of breathing, then mindfulness of the body, mindfulness of emotions, and mindfulness of thoughts.

With each of those areas, it's easy to get focused *on* those things. We're breathing, we're focusing on the breathing, and the breathing seems like what's most important. Or if there is pain, we're focused on the pain in the body, and that seems the most important. Maybe we're focusing on an emotion – the emotion seems central and juicy, and so the attention is focused on the emotion – or the focus is on thinking, whatever it might be.

That is part of what mindfulness is. But in doing so, what's also important is the focus itself – the attention that is being brought. How are we with the attention? What attitude comes with the attention?

It's a little like driving a car when the windshield has been cleaned. Maybe you're going on a long road trip on the freeway, and ever so slowly the windshield gets dirty. That happens very slowly so you don't see the dirt building up. After a while, you realize that you're straining to look out of the windshield. It's a little hard to see through the dirt. Then you stop to get gas and you clean your windshield. Lo and behold, it's clear again, and you realize some of the tension that had been building up was because of your difficulty in seeing. But while you were driving, you hadn't realized that was difficult.

That sometimes happens to me when I wear my glasses. They get dirty without me knowing it. Sometimes I don't notice that I can't see things quite so clearly. With the example of the dirty windshield, we don't notice the seeing itself and how that's changed because our focus was on driving and staying safe on the freeway.

So the art of this is to be able to step back or turn the attention around 180 degrees and notice the quality of the attention we're bringing, the quality of *how* we're practicing. I like to say that only two things are going on: what's happening, and our relationship to what's happening. We're entering into the domain of how we're relating to whatever's happening, whether it's within us or around us.

Our topic today is relaxation. We can start to notice: Are we tense? Are we contracted? Are we tight? Are we pushing? Are we forceful? Are we resisting in a tense way? It's easy to justify that tension and tightness because of the challenges the world brings. It's easy to say: "The problem's out there; the problem is that thing I'm focusing on. I have to fix that, do something with it, or get away from it." We're not noticing that tension is building up. Maybe we're not even wanting to take responsibility for that tension.

When we do mindfulness practice, when we're focusing on the Dharma, the way that we relate to what's happening is central and crucial. The attitude we have, the reactions we have to it, the way in which we bring attention to bear on whatever we're doing – that is part of the pathway of suffering. It's the part of the pathway where we can take the most regular, ongoing responsibility and make the biggest difference.

Let's say someone's angry with you. On a scale of one to ten, maybe the anger is a four or a five. What they're angry about seems not right to you and so you get upset and tense. Perhaps, you could politely ask them to stop being angry. You might insist that they stop or you will walk away. You could say, "Let's talk about it." Or you could turn them upside down and try to shake the anger out of them. There are all kinds of options that you have.

Sometimes most of those might work. But sometimes they don't work, and then the irritation, frustration, and tension can build. You might say that person is making you tense. In some kind of way, there's a relationship between that person's anger and the tension you have. But the tension is your contribution to the situation. You might associate their anger with fear – their anger is frightening for you. The person's anger might remind you of an angry bully when you were young. Or the person's anger reminds you of all the injustices you've had to suffer. So there are all these reasons why tension and reactivity might arise, but that belongs to your inner life – your preferences, experiences, memories, judgments, and desire to protect yourself. All these things come into play.

These are pathways of suffering. A loud, angry voice comes towards us. We receive it; we hear it. We process it and feel afraid and tense up in a certain way. Or we process it and feel angry in return, and we tense up in a different way. And so that's the pathway. Then we react – we may get angry back or we say something.

But if we can sit in that place where there's a choice – whether to be relaxed or tense; whether to go with the tension or allow it or to relax – then we're getting close to where the Dharma is. Now we're focusing on our contribution to our suffering.

One of the key things that mindfulness practice or the Dharma can do is that we're very keen to take responsibility for our contribution to whatever is difficult. This doesn't deny that things need to be changed or fixed in the world, but at least we can always look at what our contribution is to our suffering.

The place that I'd like to recommend looking at is how we have become tense, contracted, and tight – the ways in which we feel a restless compulsion to push and to do. Maybe that can be relaxed. Not relaxed and softened so that the real-world issues are denied – if there are real-world issues – but relaxed so that we can come to them with the most wisdom and care and the best place that we know.

The more tense people become, most don't respond with a lot of wisdom or care. Sometimes they respond in detrimental ways. There can be a lot of justification – kind of unconscious justification – for being tense. There can be a lot of justification or feeling that the blame is in the other person or the situation, and so that keeps the focus out there.

In mindfulness of the mind, we're turning the attention back to see what is happening in our attitude and our relationship with ourselves. We are training ourselves to do that – to keep looking there, see where the tension is, and then relax.

To be given the instructions to relax might seem superficial, not very profound, not very spiritually ultimate or valuable. But relaxing is kind of a simplistic way of referring to the deep letting go, the deep opening up, that Buddhist spirituality moves towards. Relaxing is part and parcel of this movement toward deep freedom. So, to take seriously the way we become tense brings us into the territory of where we contribute to our suffering and where we can contribute to our freedom from suffering.

Don't overlook your tension. Don't justify being tense. Maybe, occasionally, it's okay. But the opportunity in this practice is to turn around, take an honest look at it, and see what can relax. Once you're kind of relaxed, then you can turn your attention around again to what needs to be addressed.

May the bliss and blessings of relaxation be something that you study and work with as you go through your day. This is not a simplistic thing. This is a deep root in so many profound areas of our life. Hopefully, you'll enjoy it. May your shoulders, belly, face, eyes, hands, heart, and mind find more relaxation today. Thank you.