

Introduction to Mindfulness (8 of 25)

Relaxation as a Guide

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Calming, softening, gentling, tension, agitation, ease, breathe, shoulding, wanting, preoccupied, thoughts, rhythm, massage, reactivities, door, equanimous, discomfort, reference point, field, sensations, three-breath journey, holding, contraction

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Hello and welcome to the third talk on mindfulness of the body.

One of the important areas of mindfulness practice is relaxation or calming. In the Buddha's language, the word he uses may be closer to our English word for calming. We can think of it as physical calming.

Many people associate meditation with relaxing, calming, softening, or a gentling of our body, mind, and heart. A significant thing begins to happen when we have any degree of relaxation or calmness that is more than we normally have in our lives. Relaxation of the body becomes a reference point for understanding ourselves better.

When we experience more relaxation than usual, we have a chance to notice when we return to our usual state. We have a chance to notice greater relaxation because our normal state is usually more tense or agitated. Having a physical reference point for this allows us to see more clearly what is happening. It is easier to notice when we are engaged in some activity or way of being that adds tension. First, we simply see that we are becoming more tense. Then we can ask, "Do we want to go along with this tension, or do we want to return to the place of greater relaxation?"

One definition of meditation that I have heard is to set yourself at ease and notice what takes away that ease. Let yourself be calm and notice what takes away that calm. Let your body be somewhat relaxed. It doesn't have to be dramatic – just a little more relaxed than usual. Notice what takes you away from that ease. When we do that, then we can ask ourselves these questions: Should I continue doing this? Is this necessary? Is there an alternative? Can I do what needs to be done without being so tense? What would that look like?

Relaxing the body becomes a reference point. That reference point is particularly useful in meditation because when we are meditating, there is nothing in the world that we must do. We can question the idea that we need to get tense right now. In meditation, it is easier to conclude that we don't need to be tense right now. Maybe when the meditation is over, we will need to be tense, but now we don't.

We begin to question and doubt the value of tensing up, which is equivalent to the ways we get preoccupied or caught in our thoughts or feelings. Then we can see more clearly what is going on. We might decide there is no need to tense up, that we don't have to allow the tension. We can recognize that it is physical tension we have, and then we might be able to soften or relax it.

I have found that one of the great ways of relaxing is to feel the places of tension in my body and then breathe with them. Sometimes this can be done directly, but sometimes it's as if I am breathing through the tension. We accompany the experience of tension with the physical rhythms of the body breathing. It is almost like an act of imagination. We are breathing in and out through that tension rather than through our nostrils. We are using our imagination a little.

We are pairing up the places of tension with the breathing. The rhythm of the breathing itself can be relaxing. Feeling and being with the breath in this way is like a massage, where we aren't caught in the reactivities of the mind that are causing the tension. We are shifting the locale of our attention.

Rather than feeling that the tension is an unfortunate thing, the more we see our tension, the more it can be a door to a deeper understanding of what's happening to us. So, tension is not necessarily bad. We don't necessarily want to be in a hurry to relax. One way to tense up even more is to feel that the tension is wrong and we need to be relaxed.

We want to be easy with the tension. Certainly, it is good to relax if it is easy to do, but it is also about being present for physical tension. We begin learning how to be comfortable with discomfort. Learning to be equanimous and calm about being tense or agitated is a powerful tool. It is a powerful foundation for deepening this practice.

At the beginning of this introduction to meditation course, I talked about how distractions don't need to be treated as the enemy or a problem for meditation. Seeing we are distracted and being mindful of that is mindfulness. Then mindfulness has succeeded.

The same thing is true of the tensions and agitations in our system, in our body. We open to and are mindful of these too without the idea that they should be different. One thing that gets highlighted through this reference point of focusing on tension and relaxation is when needing or shoulding is happening. If we are very sensitive, we will feel and see how the shoulding, needing, and wanting are themselves a form of tension. They may be more of a tension of the thinking mind.

So much gets revealed through this fascinating reference point. We can see when the mind operates in ways that are unsupportive or unwholesome for us. Many of the ways we take a wrong turn in our lives get manifested as tension in the body. The ability to relax the body and feel that as a reference point for our tension helps us to understand ourselves better.

A deep experience of relaxation can register as a memory. That memory of relaxation can support us when we find ourselves tense. We might say to ourselves, "Wow, this is different from this reference point I have of what is possible. Should I just continue doing what I'm doing, or should I excuse myself from this situation? Maybe I could go to the bathroom."

Most people won't question why we are going to the bathroom. We are going there to breathe and relax. There is this wonderful meditation throne that we could sit on for a while, maybe with the lid down. Just sit on it and meditate. Maybe do the three-breath journey. It doesn't have to be long. We just realize how tense or caught up we are, and question whether we need to continue with that.

We look for simple ways. Try a three-breath journey. Relax. This frees up attention and mindfulness. This frees up mindfulness of sensing the body. A relaxed body is a field of sensations. They may not always be distinct. They may simply be a sense of vibrations, warmth, or tingling.

If the body is very tense, we might have some acute sensations around the tension. When there are a lot of tense muscles, there can be a tendency for those muscles to go numb. When there is too much tension, we can lose a connection to ourselves. The relaxation is rediscovering that connection and opening to it again.

Today's theme of mindfulness of the body focuses on the value of relaxation. Relaxation can be overdone. It shouldn't be a forever project to just relax, relax, relax. But it is an important part of the mindfulness terrain. It is self-correcting. If we pay attention to even the subtlest tensions, we will discover when relaxing is no longer needed or useful. We will see when the focus and the ways we are trying to relax have tension embedded in them. The self-correcting aspect of mindfulness of tension helps mindfulness to be at ease. That is why I love these instructions: set yourself at ease and notice what takes you away from it.

I would encourage you to continue with the theme of mindfulness of the body today. Use the physical sense of unease and ease to guide and inform you. Let tension, holding, contraction, and relaxation help you feel a deeper connection to what's going on. Don't be in a hurry to relax.

Even in meditation and elsewhere, it is good to not relax at the first opportunity we have. If some tension can relax, take a few breaths to feel it better. Feeling tension more fully can allow the relaxation to be deeper. Feeling something more fully and then letting go can let the letting go be fuller as well.

So, take time during the day. For those of you who have enjoyed the instruction to practice by setting a timer, try that today. Set a timer so that periodically and regularly you get little reminders to check in about what is feeling tense or relaxed. What is available to learn with tension and relaxation as a reference point for your life?

So, thank you very much and I look forward to tomorrow. Thank you.