Relax Connection with the Breath

Andrea Fella · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Andrea Fella · 1:01:49

This morning we'll start by chanting the refuges and precepts together. For those of you continuing on five precepts, as we chant the precepts together, after you finish chanting the fifth precept, you can just fall silent while those of you who are taking the eight precepts will continue and chant the next three. Then we'll all come back together again to chant the final Yidang Meisi Lang.

Those of you who are on eight precepts, how many of you have never chanted those last three before? A few of you. So I'll do those three call and response, a few words at a time, particularly for the seventh one. But we'll chant everything else together.

Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa
Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sama Sambuddhasa

Buddhang saranam gacchami
Dhammang saranam gacchami
Sangam saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi buddhang saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi dhammang saranam gacchami
Dutiyampi sangam saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi buddhang saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi dhammang saranam gacchami
Tatiyampi sangam saranam gacchami

Panatipata veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Adinnadana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Brahmacharya veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Musavada veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Sura meraya majapamadatana veramani sikapadam samadiyami

Call and response:
Vikalabhojana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Nacca gita vadita visukadassana malagandha vilepana dharana mandana vibhusanatana veramani sikapadam samadiyami
Uccha sayana maha sayana veramani sikapadam samadiyami

All together:
Sadhu sadhu sadhu

Each morning, in offering these instructions, we've been exploring ways to settle and collect the mind with an anchor for the attention. We've suggested three possible anchors: the breath, whole body sensation, and the experience of hearing. You may by now have a sense of which of these is more comfortable for you to settle in with. We've also been pointing to ways to gather and collect the attention in a relaxed way, and each of us finds our own approach to doing that.

Today I'll offer one way that has been very helpful for me to settle naturally and easefully with the breath. The guided portion will focus on collecting the attention with the breath, and as we come to the end, you're welcome to shift to hearing or the body if you're using a different experience to gather and collect the attention.

Allow the posture to be relaxed. Our skeleton is actually designed to hold us upright, and we can relax all the muscles around those bones. Find a posture that's balanced. You might want to rock a little bit and find a posture where you can actually relax the muscles around the bones.

In settling in to connect with the experience of breathing, I've found it so helpful to begin by creating what we might call a container of relaxation. Rather than starting with attending to the breath, I start with relaxing the body. We can do this in a systematic way, through a slight, gentle scan through the body.

Perhaps the muscles of the head and face can relax. I find softening the face to be particularly useful—allowing all the muscles around the forehead, the eyes, the cheeks, the jaw to soften. Relaxing the crown of the head, the back of the head, the neck. The shoulders. Softening the arms and hands.

Relaxing the torso, all of those muscles around the rib cage. Sometimes a deeper breath at this point can really help to stretch and expand those muscles, and then soften and relax on the out breath. Perhaps another deeper breath, with the emphasis on allowing this part of the body to really relax.

Softening the muscles across the abdomen, the lower back and middle back. That can be an area where we almost subconsciously hold tension. So perhaps let that area hang forward a little bit. Softening the hips, inside the hip sockets, the legs, the feet.

There's also sometimes the possibility of working from the outside of the body inward, to soften more deeply inside the body, in this core area. Perhaps there can be a relaxation inside the throat. Perhaps the area around the heart can relax. Perhaps the stomach and intestines can soften and relax.

As the body relaxes even just a little bit, it creates conditions that support the mind to soften and relax. You may notice a little bit of softening of the mind. One of my colleagues, Gil Fronsdal, has used an analogy to support the relaxation of mind which I've found useful at times: as if the brain were a muscle,

perhaps the brain can relax.

And sometimes there can be a little more release that's possible by dropping in a request, just an invitation: May the body relax. Not trying to do it, not searching for any place to relax, but simply dropping in that invitation and seeing how the body responds. May the body relax. May the mind relax.

As there is a little bit of relaxation of body and mind, awareness can be more easily available. So are you aware? And how is that awareness feeling into, connecting with, being with the breathing? The breathing that's already happening. There's no need to aim or focus or try to find the breath. Maybe have the sense of letting the breath come into awareness—receiving the breath as it is.

With an openness and a curiosity: how does it show up? Not looking for any particular sensations, but just being available to connect with the sensations that are happening while you're breathing, wherever that is for you. It may be a broad area of experience in the torso. It may be a little more contained around the nostrils or in the throat. It may feel like a movement or a flow of sensations—the expanding and contracting of the chest, the rising and falling of the abdomen.

Allow the mind and the body to stay relaxed as much as possible. And if you find tension creeps back in, perhaps drop in that request again: may the body relax. And connect with the breath, allowing the breath to be as it is.

For some of us, bringing attention to the breath can make it hard to let go into just the breath breathing itself. If that's the case for you, just notice: this is how it is to pay attention to the breath right now. This is the experience. This is how it feels. However it is, allowing it to be. Allowing your experience to be exactly as it is—this friendly, receptive, caring attention. Befriending your body, befriending the breath.

A light touch of effort, just enough to connect with half a breath. How does this in-breath feel? How does this out-breath feel? And doing it again. And again.

There will be times when other experience arises and pulls at the attention. For now, we're still exploring staying with the breath. You can gently acknowledge that experience, maybe with a light touch of a note—hearing, or thinking, or sensing—and then reconnect. Relax, perhaps, because sometimes when the attention is pulled there can be tension that comes in. So relax, and reconnect. How is this breath?

If the attention is pulled more strongly and it feels like there's not an easy way to let go or set aside that other experience, maybe there can be an opening to: well, that's happening. There's thinking happening, and the breath is happening. There's thinking and the breath. This is a little broader container, perhaps, but it allows the attention to stay connected to the breath even as other things go on around it. Hearing and the breath. Other body sensations and the breath. Thinking and the breath.

The guided offering this morning is really just one way to explore and support a relaxed container for the practice. For myself, that kind of exploration of relaxation at the beginning was really supportive, because

this body and mind was very tense. It was helpful to take the time to go through—often a body scan—especially depending on when I sat down and how much tension there was. And that can come and go during the retreat.

And so as the retreat moves on, there may be days that you sit down and just feel very relaxed at the beginning. When that happened for me, I would simply invite a little more relaxation, just use those invitations. These invitations can be surprisingly powerful as a way in, especially as the mind settles a little more.

On retreats where I was doing this more focused practice, I would settle in, check in—okay, pretty relaxed—and then just drop in. Maybe there's a little more relaxation. "May the body relax"—and feel, not do it, but just feel into how the body responds to that. And then, "May the mind relax." And then, "May the attention rest with the breathing." Again, not trying to aim at the breath, but inviting the attention to just connect. "May the attention rest with the breathing. May the breathing be comfortable and relaxed."

Those invitations supported the connection to the breath to be infused with relaxation for me. If you find this useful, play with it. If you don't find it useful, just let it go. There are so many different ways in, and what I find is that we each find our way based on things we've heard in teachings, in instructions, and things that come to us as we practice.

A question arose about the relationship between relaxation and maintaining an erect posture—about how one might work to find an upright position that involves some effort in the lower spine, and whether that creates a contradiction with the relaxation approach.

I think it really depends, and you can play with both. See what supports the mind to be most settled. If you actually find that using a little bit of tension in your lower back to keep the posture upright helps—sometimes a little bit of tension down there can allow other things to relax, and that's fine. Or you could just play with what I've found for myself: finding a spot where, even if it's a little slumped, everything can be relaxed, and that supports the mindfulness. We're really not looking for a correct posture, but rather what posture will support a relaxed attention. You can play with both and see what actually is supportive. And it may be different at different times.

I'll offer one more tool that I've used to support a very relaxed connection with the breath. This one may be a little less intuitive. It uses the way our mind can look at things on the periphery of our attention.

In the visual field, for example, if you're looking straight ahead, you can also see things off to the side in your peripheral vision—not by looking directly at them, but by softening the gaze. Not aiming at looking straight ahead, but softening and just kind of taking in what's there on the periphery.

That kind of softening of the gaze can also happen in our minds, in connecting with the breathing or other objects as well. You might just play with that now: explore a large container and the breath, not looking directly at the breath, but allowing it to kind of come in from the sides.

For me, I found that aiming was where the tension got the most tight—when I thought, "Okay, I'm going to look right here at the nostrils."

You can also have the intention to connect with the nostrils at the nostrils, but not look directly at it. It can take a little time, but play with that. It feels like a broader attention that's connecting here, but not looking at it directly. For me, that brings in again a little more softening in the mind that is connecting with the attention. That can also be a kind of knowing the breathing—you're aware that you're breathing without focusing on particular sensations.

This talk was given during a meditation retreat. The original transcript has been lightly edited for readability while preserving the teacher's voice and meaning.

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