

CUTTING THE CORD

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In my experience, one of the chief obstacles in learning to meditate was proper understanding of the word "relax." Misunderstanding this word probably set my meditation progress back by a good 10-15 years. Yes, I said "years." Imagine that!

It is not that I did not read the words "Relax the mind," "Rest the mind," and so on. I did read the words, but I made the sincere mistake of interpreting this relaxing or resting as something that "I" had to do, something to be done. I had to "relax" the mind when I meditated... "had to do." This I believe is not what is meant in the teachings.

When the teachings say "relax" or "rest," they really mean relax and rest, just as you and I already know how to relax after a hard day's work. And the teachings don't mean that "we" rest the mind or relax, but rather that we let the mind rest...we let the mind relax. All you really have to do is relax and rest as we do when we plop down on the couch and watch TV or whatever. We all know how to relax... sometimes.

It might seem contradictory to relax when we practice sitting, as meditation is all about being alert, aware, and awake. It takes effort to meditate, right? Not necessarily and not that kind of effort. It is hard to make an effort to relax.

Rather than make an effort to focus on the object of meditation, be it the breath, a pebble, twig, or just nothing at all, what is important is to deeply relax and let that pebble, twig, or breath float to focus on our relaxation. Allow the object of our meditation to just be. In other words, relax as it is.

Of course this is easier said than done; I know that now. But it won't hurt you to have it pointed out that Shamata or sitting meditation cannot work without true relaxation, without actually just letting the mind rest. And it feels good too!

If we 'try' to make progress in meditation, that is very difficult. The more deeply we can relax when we meditate, the more actual progress is made. Actual meditation is allowing the mind to lightly rest on the object we have chosen to focus on. For most of us this is the breath, but as mentioned, it can be a pebble, a twig, a Buddha statue, or absolutely nothing at all.

My favorite analogy on how to let the mind rest comes from the great siddha Orgyenpa, who said:

"Rest unrestrained,
Like a bundle of hay,
Whose strap has been cut."

That is resting. Here are a couple of little poems I wrote about letting the mind rest:

TESTING THE REST

Learning to rest the mind,
Really puts me to the test,

So sometimes I just need to take a break,
And simply get some rest.

THE REST OF THE MIND
You cannot rest the mind,
But you can let the mind rest.
Just let go,
And don't mind the rest.

- Michael

