

SOFT BELLY

We are conditioned to suffer. The society of the hard-bellied and deeply pained conforms to this lowest denominator. We wander hard and lost through our lives until we awaken with a deep sigh of letting go and soften to the path of mercy.

When growth has become the priority, soft belly becomes the context for our letting go. Observing the relative openness or closedness of the belly gives insight into when and how we are holding to our pain. When the belly is hard there is holding. Some degree of fighting or posturing is resisting and hardening to the moment, attempting to control. You may have to come back to soft belly dozens of times an hour.

The belly is an extraordinary diagnostic instrument. It displays the armoring of the heart as a tension in the belly. The deeper our relationship to the belly, the sooner we

discover if we are holding in the mind or opening into the heart. Trying tightens the belly. Trying stimulates judgement. Hard belly is often judging belly. Even trying to understand what is being said now, the belly may tighten.

Don't try only to understand. Enter the process. In soft belly simply allow understanding to arise, all by itself, from your true nature.

Beyond the mind is everything you long, in the mind, to know. But the great irony of the spiritual search is that what we are looking for is *what is looking*.

It is difficult to see that which sees, but not impossible. It takes some work to let go of old ways of seeing. Softening the belly is a beginning.

Indeed we are programmed to hold to our pain, to turn it to suffering. We are taught to harden the belly, to hide its fullness, its roundness, its spaciousness. Women in particular are programmed to be "attractive." Encouraged to wear undergarments that compress the belly and decrease the sense of spaciousness. Men, too, can often be noticed "holding in the belly" to be acceptable. Implored to be hard-bellied by a culture which confuses hardness with beauty. It is a dangerous way to live if one wishes to be fully alive.

The more one thinks that he or she is the body, the tighter the belly will be at times. There are so many levels of letting go into the enormity of being, but when there is a holding in of the belly the heart is not so available.

Ondrea and I have been doing this practice for years. And still we notice again and again that the belly needs to be reminded that it has unconsciously tightened to that which we wish to remain unconscious of. So you inhale down into the belly. And you exhale out past the heart. And the belly softens and you find room in your body for healing, for being, for liberation. The softer the belly, the greater the capacity to stay present and awake during the dense dream of heavy mental states. Soft belly encourages

investigation of the body-patterning that accompanies such states. It allows exploration without getting drawn into their familiar, seductive thought-patterns. We cannot overestimate the importance of softening.

Some years ago Ondrea and I turned to each other and said, "You know, it's time for us to stop auditioning for the kids. We've got the job!" We are constantly auditioning for the people we want love from. Our parents, our children, our lovers, our co-workers, our mates. Hard belly is always auditioning, posturing, angling for control. But, this is it. You've got the job. You've taken incarnation. Now, deepen soft belly to make room in your life for your life.

A GUIDED SOFT- BELLY MEDITATION

(To be read slowly to a friend or silently to oneself.)

Let your attention come into the body.
Let awareness come to the level of sensation in the body.
Feel the physical sensations of being in a body.
Sensations of the buttocks on the chair or on a pillow.
The pull of gravity.
Sensations of the chest moving, the breath.
Sensations in the neck, the weight of the head.
Feel this body you sit in.
Gradually allow your attention to come to the belly.
And begin to soften the belly.
Make room for the breath in the belly.
Breathing in, belly rises.
Breathing out, belly falls.
Soften to receive the breath down into the belly.
Allow the breath to breathe itself in soft belly.
Each breath softening, opening, releasing.
Inhalation, belly rising, filling with softness.

Exhalation, belly falling, releasing any holding.

Expanding and contracting belly.

Soft belly.

The breath breathing itself in the softness.

Letting go in the belly. Levels and levels of softness.

So much grief held in the belly, so much fear and armoring.

Let it all float in soft belly.

Not hardening it to suffering. Just letting it be in mercy, in soft belly.

Notice how even a single thought can tense the belly, harden it to armoring, to separation, to grief.

Letting go with each inhalation, softening the belly.

Letting go with each exhalation, making space.

Each exhalation breathing out the pain. Letting it go.

Soft belly. Merciful belly.

Levels and levels of softening.

Levels and levels of letting go.

So much room for liberation. So much room to be in soft belly.

Have mercy on you. Each breath softening.

Softening the belly to uncover the heart.

Letting go in the belly of the old holding which blocks the heart.

Each exhalation letting go of the pain. Breathing out the hardness, the armoring. Making room for your life in soft belly.

Expectation, judgement, doubt. Old griefs congregate in the belly. Softening allows them to disperse, to dissolve in soft belly. Pains, fears, doubts dissolving, dissolving into the softness, the spaciousness of a merciful belly.

Let it all float in soft belly. Have mercy. Levels and levels of softening meeting the moment.

Levels and levels of being in soft belly.

Breathing in, breathing out in soft belly.

Even if hardness is discovered in the midst of the

increasing softness, just watch it float through. Let the hardness float in the softness. Nothing to change, no urgency in soft belly. Let urgency float in the softness. Room even for the pain in the mercy and awareness of soft belly.

Let the sound of these words pass right through you. Don't hold anywhere. Trust the process.

Let all that arises pass through the spaciousness of soft belly.

And let your eyes gently open.

And as your eyes open, notice at what point the belly tightens once again. At what point the "someoneness" reasserts itself and you feel a need to protect. At what point does the armoring reestablish its long presence?

Softening with the eyes wide open to the world.

Softening to the pain we all share and the legacy of healing exposed in the deepening softness.