



Strong Back, Soft Front Guided Meditation

I came across a meditation practice that has been tremendously helpful, especially during difficult times when I'm not feeling very resilient.

A practice that was inspired by Roshi Joan Halifax Ph.D., a Buddhist teacher and founder of Upaya Zen Center in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

One of the core messages of her teachings is the value of cultivating a strong back and a soft front.

Joan Halifax introduced this practice in relation to being with the dying, but it's an invaluable practice for all of us.

Sit for a moment and let the concept of a strong back, soft front really sink into your being. What does it mean to you to have a strong back and soft front?

It can mean many different things- depending on what's going on in our lives.

When I think about a strong back, I often think about having a "backbone" and being able to set healthy boundaries. Boundaries that enable us to keep our hearts open because we're finding a balance between caring for ourselves and caring for others.

Without that balance and a strong back, we can tend to close our heart and harden our soft front.

Brené Brown found through her research that the most compassionate people are also not afraid to set healthy boundaries.

"Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They're compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment."

Kristin Neff, who's well known for her research and work on self-compassion, has more recently introduced the concept of fierce self-compassion. The idea that being compassionate with ourselves and others doesn't mean that there aren't times when we need to be fierce and set boundaries. It's about finding the balance and the understanding that it's not an either/or.

In addition to the balance between compassion and fierce self-compassion (boundaries) the concept of the soft front, strong back is also helpful when we think of going through challenging times.

Joan Halifax explains that having a strong back and soft front "is about the relationship between equanimity and compassion".

A strong back is about equanimity and our capacity to uphold ourselves, especially during difficult times.

It means we are cultivating an ability to maintain a calm mind with emotional and mental stability. It enables us to be grounded, rooted and strong while remaining flexible, adaptable and open to change.

The soft front is about opening to things as they are. It's about accepting life as it is rather than longing or worrying about the future and wishing things were different. Cultivating this quality within ourselves enables us to remain open to life without shutting down or collapsing.

When we cultivate a strong back and soft front within ourselves, we can weather the storms of life with strength, wisdom, grace and an open heart. We develop the ability to actually grow as a result of the challenges.

"There is always a storm. There is always rain. Some experience it. Some live through it. And others are made from it." – Shannon L. Alder

We unite the qualities traditionally associated with the feminine way of being—gentleness, empathy, receptivity, and sensitivity—with those traditionally associated with the masculine way of being—courage, independence, and assertiveness.

What I've noticed in my own life and in the work that I do with others is that we tend to have it reversed. It's common for us to have a weak back that results in us crumbling during difficult times and then, as a result, we have a hard front. We close our hearts and resist life as it is.

I invite you to spend 10 minutes listening to the audio. You can incorporate this practice into your existing meditation practice, or you can use it like a mantra throughout your day- reminding yourself to meet life with a strong back and a soft front.