Body Related Issues

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One of the purposes of meditation is to make you more and more aware, more and more familiar with how you inhabit your body. Many people come to meditation with the idea that it’s going to be very abstract and ethereal. And what impresses you most is how many bodily issues you come up with, pain in the legs, pain in the back, difficulty with breathing, questions of posture. Everyone wants to get past these so they can get to the real work of the meditation, but that’s where the real work lies, is in getting familiar with your posture, with your breathing, with the pain in the body. We’ve been trying to run away from these things for such a long time. What meditation does is turns us around and brings us back in. So you can’t run away from this. You’ve got to work through it. After all, they talk about touching nirvana with the body. It’s an interesting phrase. It’s a full body experience. The body is there at the threshold. And only when you’re fully in the body can you get to that kind of threshold. This means examining not only the sense of form within the body, but also formless states that are experienced here in the body. The forest tradition, according to Lumpa Putt, who was one of the main teachers in the tradition, got its start, at least its foundation in the Pali Canon, lies in the discourse on mindfulness immersed in the body. It’s an interesting phrase. “Gaya-katha-sati” is the Pali. And the “katha” here is the immersed. You want to fully inhabit the body with your awareness. Fully inhabit the breathing. Fully inhabit your movements as you go through the day. Get a greater and greater sense of what you’ve got here. And from mindfulness it moves. It moves seamlessly into concentration. It’s one of those sutras that doesn’t make a big distinction between mindfulness and concentration. It doesn’t make a big distinction between tranquility and insight. It brings them together. Because there’s no way you’re going to have insight into the body until you’re still in the body. You can maintain your focus right here and learn how to live with what’s there in the body. If pain comes, it’s not the case that you either push it away or you run away trying to get outside of the body. Your initial reaction may be that you’ve got to retreat to a part of the body that’s more comfortable so you can gather your strength. But eventually you have to get back into the pain just to explore that sensation, see what it really is. As the Buddha said, you don’t go beyond pain without comprehending it. You don’t go beyond suffering without comprehending it. The word we use for comprehending means fully knowing. And you can fully know something only if you’re fully inhabiting it. Our path is one of bringing the body along, getting very familiar with what’s going on in the interface between the mind and the body. This is why the breath is such an ideal topic for meditation. It’s where the mind and the body meet. As you get to know the breath, you realize it’s throughout the body. So much in your mind is indicated by the way you breathe. Blind spots in the mind can be sensed by the fact that there are blind spots in your body, blind spots in the breath energy in the body. As you start getting more and more aware of the way the breathing process goes, it makes you more and more aware of what’s going on in the mind. So it’s a fully embodied process that we’re working on here. They talk about paññana. It’s not wisdom in the sense of having wise sayings. Many wouldn’t consider it wise sayings. What we’re working on is the quality of discernment, seeing what’s going on very intimately, very clearly, because we’re familiar with it. In other words, we have to make friends with the body. You may have to wrestle with certain issues in the body, like pain, but ultimately you want to come out friends, so that when the mind fully does outgrow the body totally, it’s not through aversion. It’s through total understanding. So acquaint yourself with the processes going on in the body. Acquaint yourself with what’s going on with fear, say, or fear with pain. When you sit with a pain and suddenly the fear comes up, “This might be damaging to the body.” Well, look at that. Where does that thought come from? Is it really reality, or is it just simply something in the mind that’s cooked up from its preconceived notions? What happens when you can bracket those preconceived notions? Put a question mark beside them. Just put them aside. Many times you’ll find them really liberating. That insight can help you to turn to other ideas you’ve been carrying around about yourself, about the world. Learn how to bracket them a little bit, too. Put a question mark by them. What happens when you don’t have to carry them around? When you’re working through pain, working through the breath, working with your posture, don’t think that you’re simply laying the groundwork for something that you can later not pay attention to or that’s something you want to get past very quickly. It’s in working with these things that you learn an awful lot. You read a John Lee’s teachings on the breath, and you see that throughout his life, up to the day he died almost, he was still exploring new areas of the breath, new ways of conceiving the breath, new ways of using the breath as medicine for the body and as objects for developing good qualities in the mind for gaining discernment into the processes of the mind. There’s a lot of potential there. And it’s one of those areas, like the Finns outside of Moab in Utah, which they still after all these years haven’t been fully explored. Or nooks and crannies in the Grand Canyon, which they say still haven’t been fully mapped. There’s a lot to keep exploring in terms of the breath, how it relates to your posture, how it relates to the sense of ease in the body, how it relates to your sense of being in the body. There’s a lot to explore here. It’s not the case, as I said, that you work on your breath and work on your posture and then you get down to the real work. The real work is right here, because it’s all connected. Certain things about the way you hold your body, the muscles you use for the breathing process, are very intimately related to patterns in the mind. Sometimes the way we label something and then pay attention only to the label and not to the facts out there that are calling that label into question. It starts with this most intimate part of ourselves as our relationship to the body, and it moves out from there. So if you want to overcome that habit or learn how to see through that habit, you’ve got to learn to see through it right here, because this is where it begins. If you want to understand the question of intention, how intention keeps shaping your experience of the present, you have to look here and see how intention relates to the body, how it relates to the breath, how it relates to your posture, how it relates to the way you deal with pain. These are the really intimate issues, and it’s right here at the intimate issues that you can see things clearly.

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