Surpassing Expectations

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Meditating is like looking for something you’ve lost. You have a general idea where it is, and so you go back and forth, back and forth, back and forth, the same place, looking for it. So you know that you’ve dropped something in your room. You don’t find it the first time, you go back again, looking all over the room again. You don’t find it the second time, you keep looking in the same spot. You know that it has to be there. And you know that the third and fourth and fifth trips around. You have to be even more and more and more observant all the time to find what it was. It’s the same way with the meditation. You keep going over the same spot over and over and over again, the body here in the present moment. Sometimes you focus on the breath. Sometimes you go through the different parts of the body, like the bones. Basically, what you’re looking for is right here. And the reason you don’t see it the first time or the second time or the third time is because you’re not looking carefully enough. That’s one reason. The other is that you may have the wrong idea of what you’re looking for, like looking for a mushroom. There’s a kind of a mushroom called the horn of plenty. And people who go looking for it in the forest say in the beginning you can’t see it at all. And then someone who’s really expert at looking for those mushrooms comes in the same spot that you went over many, many times. They find lots of them. And the problem is you have to have seen at least one to get an idea of what it looks like. Once you see it, it basically looks like a little hole in the ground. Once you see it, then you see it all over the place. And so in that case, the problem is not so much that you’re not looking carefully enough. It’s just that you have the wrong mental image. You’re trying to match up your mental image with what you see here, and it doesn’t match up. So you don’t see anything. So these are two issues you have to think about when you’re focusing on the present moment. One is, are you paying attention with enough precision, really looking carefully? As I mentioned this afternoon, if you find yourself getting bored with the meditation, because you’re not really paying careful attention, you say, “Well, I’ve been here before. Same breath in, out. What else is there?” If you really want to see what it has to offer, you have to look more carefully, and then more carefully. At the same time, you may have to work with your mental image of the breath. When you breathe in, exactly where do you feel that the breath has to come in? Which muscles do you have to use? What sensations do there have to be to let you know that now the breath is coming in, now it’s going out? Then you can question those preconceived notions. Do you have to have those sensations with each in-breath and out-breath? Does the breath have to come in and out that way? Can you breathe in other ways? You notice, especially when there are parts of the body that seem to be more tired than others, more tense than others. Maybe they’re being overworked by the breathing. Maybe it’s time to let other muscles take up some of the slack. Allow these muscles to relax. These are some of the questions you want to ask yourself when you have trouble settling with the breath, or it doesn’t feel comfortable, or you feel that the more you work with the breath, the tighter and more tense it gets. Back off a little bit. See if reconceiving the breath, having a different picture in your mind of the breath, helps you settle down with a comfortable breath more easily. Many people complain that they seem to be out of touch with their bodies. A lot of times it’s their mental pictures they have of how the mind relates to the body. Those are the things that are getting in the way. So you want to play with those preconceived notions. Allow yourself to think in other ways. The breath coming in the back of the neck, say, the breath energy coming there. What would that be like? Or the breath coming in and out the middle of the chest? Right above the navel. All sorts of places you could have it coming in and out. See if changing your mental image of the breath changes the way you experience your body. Or consciously locate the different parts of the body in your awareness. This is what that bone meditation is good for. Ask, “Where are the bones at the tips of the fingers?” You can get a sense of where the tips of your fingers are. Many times you’ll find that your awareness of the body has this big undifferentiated field. It takes a little while to figure out exactly where the tips of the fingers are, especially when you’re sitting here trying to relax. It’s like a science fiction story I read one time where they were working on a machine to teleport people from earth to the moon. There was one bug they hadn’t worked out, which was that the bones transported more slowly than the rest of your tissues. So you’d put a rabbit in one end, and then on the moon would come out this kind of rabbit pile, or rabbit pool, basically, waiting for the bones to come. Then the rabbit pool would, every now and then, take shape. An ear would come out, or a paw. It’s a forming out of this undifferentiated field. Many times your awareness of the body seems to be that way. There’s very little differentiation. Sometimes you have a very weird idea of where your neck may be, or where your arm is connected to the body. So try to explore exactly where these parts of your body are right now. Try to get in touch. Look more carefully at which muscles or which sensations correspond to which muscles, which parts of the body. As you explore, you see there’s an awful lot here. Then as you deal with this issue, you find that other issues in the mind, especially the way the mind relates to the body, get highlighted as well. Simply by looking at this same place over and over and over again, you really get to know the territory. I know that may not quite yet be what you are looking for. After all, what are we looking for? We’re looking for nirvana. Nirvana. But before you can get there, you have to discover a lot of subtleties in the body and a lot of subtleties in the mind in the present moment. That can be done only by being very careful and very observant. So no matter how many times you’ve sat down and watched the breath, no matter how many times you’ve sat down and contemplated the body, just keep doing over and over again. It’s like losing something extremely valuable. You don’t count the number of times that it takes to look. As long as you haven’t yet found it, you keep looking, looking, looking. Try looking from different angles. Get very thorough in how you sort of comb through the rug there in the room to find whatever it was that you lost. Then ask yourself, “Well, maybe it’s fallen down and it’s in a position where it’s not what the shape or what I look at is not what I’ve conceived.” Say it fell down, upside down. So you’ve got to think of what it would look like upside down. Change your perception of it. Just keep looking, looking, looking. Come again and again and again. You’ll find lots of things. Many times you don’t find the valuable you were looking for. But you may find that there’s a lot of other interesting stuff, like that far side cartoon where the woman is looking for a hairbrush in her sofa and she finds a flattened version of some friends that just happen to be under the sofa cushion. There are a lot of things that have been lost right here in the present moment, some of them more valuable than others. But also there’s the ultimate happiness that’s been lost right here. You know there’s something valuable. So you keep looking. It’s a question of being really thorough in the looking that’s going to make all the difference. Think of it as a treasure hunt. So many times we think of meditation as a matter of programming. If you program the mind to see in certain ways, then you’re going to get the enlightenment. See everything as impermanent, stressful, and not-self. And you get a prize. But the danger there is that you can fake it. You can try to clone your preconceived notion of what that should be. You’ll get the cloned version and wonder where the prize is. It’s better to think of it as this treasure hunt. You’re not quite sure what you’re looking for. You’re given a set of standards. You’re looking for something that the three characteristics don’t apply to. So whatever you come up with, it’s like having a method of testing gold. You find something that looks like gold, you put it through the test. And if it’s not gold, well, you toss it off. Or if it’s something that’s useful for other purposes, you put it aside. But you know that that’s not the ultimate thing you’re looking for. You keep looking again, testing things again. That’s all you need. If you have too many preconceived notions of what you’re looking for, as I said, sometimes those can get in the way. So you dig up something and test it against the standards the Buddha established. If it qualifies as part of the path, you keep developing it. If it’s something else, well, you put it aside. Ultimately, you’ll find the valuable. It’s there, right here. As John Lee said, “The Buddha found an awakening right at the tip of his nose.” So the potential was always there. The question is, why did he find it then? Well, because he brought various factors of the mind together, various qualities of the mind together, in the right proportions. So he really could see very clearly, very carefully, very precisely. So keep coming back here, coming back here. Don’t do it with a sense of frustration or boredom. Try to be good-natured about the whole thing. There’s no doubt that you’ll find what you’re looking for, and it will surpass your expectations of what it might be.

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