Using Comfort

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An important part of breath meditation is learning how to become a connoisseur of your breathing, getting a sense of the range of feelings that you can get in the body from different ways that you breathe. Learning how to evaluate them, which ones feel good only for a short time and then change, which ones feel good for a longer time, which ones have a potential for getting better, and which ones have a potential for getting worse. Then, when you gain a sense of comfort from the breathing, the next question is, “What do you do with it?” Once you begin to recognize it, there tends to be a way that the mind holds on, grabs on to the comfort, as if you’ve been starving for a long time and finally got a little morsel of food. Many times, the grabbing, of course, destroys the sense of comfort. So you have to come back at it again and again and again. Learn how to be with it without grabbing, just looking at it, tending to it a little bit here, a little bit there, to make sure that it doesn’t deteriorate, but otherwise not grabbing onto it. Then, once it’s there, allowing it to spread. Again, you can’t force it to spread. You can’t drag it here or drag it there. But notice that if you let go of the boundaries of that sense of comfort and say, “Okay, you can spread wherever you want to go. Where is it going to go? It goes on its own.” Notice different parts of the body where there’s a similar feeling of comfort. Think of the different patches of comfort in your body connecting up so that they can strengthen one another. Often this is related to how you hold the body. Sometimes the way you hold the body is related to the way you breathe. Sometimes it’s related to the posture you’re trying to maintain. And oftentimes you find it gets in the way. So make a survey of your posture. Which patches of tightness in the body are pulling you out of alignment? Are they pulling you forward? Are they pulling you to the left or right? One way to notice this is simply to go through the body and tense up any muscle you’re conscious of and then allow it to relax and see what happens. For so many of us, the body is unexplored territory. We have all kinds of weird conceptions of how things connect in the body. Back in the nineteenth century, they were convinced that the Severn River in Utah flowed out to the Golden Gate in San Francisco, and it was just a matter of finding where the river flowed. Of course, it doesn’t. One of the big discoveries was the Great Basin, where rivers flow in and they just disappear. But people’s mental maps didn’t include the Great Basin for a long time. They had to go and walk down the Severn River to see what happened, and they had to walk in from the bay to see that the two didn’t connect. So you have to explore to test your preconceived notions of how things work in the body. For many of us, our sense of the body is like connect-the-dots. We have a few patches that we tend to be aware of more than other parts. We’ve never really explored to see if the way we connect those dots really does correspond to what’s going on. So here’s a chance to explore inside the body and also to understand how we relate to pleasure and pain. When pain comes, we try to place boundaries on it, make sure it doesn’t spread. A lot of these subconscious reactions to pleasure and pain are things we developed way back, even before we knew how to see them. We see pain as something to push away and pleasure as something to grab onto. The Buddhist approach is different. He says pain is something you want to comprehend. Pleasure, of the right kind, is something you want to learn how to use. The sense of ease comes simply by being in the present moment at ease with the breath, at ease with the various sensations in the body. That’s the beginning of right concentration, which is part of the path. It’s something you use. So learn to see the pain and the pleasure as means to a higher end. There are lessons to be learned from the pain. There are lessons to be learned from the pleasure. Instead of just pushing the one away and grabbing onto the other, you’ve got to watch them, observe them, test them. And in so doing, you learn a lot of interesting lessons about the body, how the mind relates to the body, and how it shapes its experience. Going over to Thailand, I found one of the most interesting things was the way people conceived of illness. They still have the theory of the four elements over there. There are wind diseases and fire diseases and water diseases and earth diseases. The elements in the body, or the properties in the body, are out of balance. For a long time, this seemed very bizarre, hearing people describe their bodies in these ways. After sitting with the breath, watching the breath, and getting a sense of where the heavy parts of the body are and where the warm parts of the body are, and parts where there’s too much or too little breath energy, you began to see that it wasn’t a bizarre way of looking at things. It was simply getting in touch with sensations that I’ve been taught to ignore or just happen to ignore. I found that that way of conceiving of the way your body operates was useful in a lot of ways. It’s especially useful for settling into the body and getting a sense of what’s going on here. In English, we don’t have much of a vocabulary for describing how the body feels from the inside. But think about which parts seem too heavy, which parts seem too light, which parts are too warm, which parts are too cold. Start with that, and then see what the breath can do to bring things into balance. Once you’re given these tools, you find that there’s a lot to explore. Again, think of them as tools, not things. Not things that you’re going to grab onto, but things that you use so you can learn. Different people will find that different sets of tools fit their hands better. In other words, you feel more comfortable maybe with the five aggregates or with the six sense spheres as a way of analyzing what’s going on. But it’s important that you find a set of tools that works and that gives you interesting feedback—things you can learn from. So you get more and more in touch with what’s going on in here. Because if you’re out of touch with what’s going on in your body, you’re also out of touch with what’s going on in your mind. You’re missing the machinations of how the mind puts thoughts together, how it reacts to feelings. Because the most immediate place where you react to things is here in the body. So try to get sensitive to how you react to pain, how you conceive and react to pleasure, and what the results are. You find that by grabbing onto a sense of pleasure, it gives rise to pain someplace else. The next time you have that sense of pleasure, think of it spreading. Be more generous with it. Don’t be so grasping and grabbing. That way you find you can get use out of the pleasure and use out of the pain instead of being something that simply comes and goes. It’s something you find you can depend on. You can begin to see the patterns of cause and effect. How you can stabilize the pleasure. Again, without grasping at it, but simply allowing it to stabilize. And then what you can do with it once you’ve got it stabilized. It’s an important part of the path. Without the sense of ease and pleasure, well-being, without the sense of fullness that can come along with it, the meditation gets dry. Like an engine without any lubricant, after all, it begins to seize up. So try to be very sensitive to how you react to pain and pleasure and how you can get more skillful in your reaction so you can get the best use out of them.

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