Friendly with the Present

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When you meditate, you have to make sure that the mind and the body are friends with each other. In other words, to get along, the mind is sensitive to the needs of the body. It looks after them. As a result, the body will provide a good place for the mind to settle down. If you try to force things too much or put too much pressure or box things in, the mind will mix up, which can often happen with the breath. You want to keep the breath under control so you create these walls around it. And of course, it’s not going to like it. It’s going to feel hemmed in. Remember that the breath is something light. It moves all the time. As soon as you box it up, it becomes stagnant. When it’s stagnant, it’s uncomfortable. So remember, it can always be flowing, and allow it to flow. You just sit here and allow yourself to be bathed in the breath without trying to create boundaries or borders for it. And also watch for any funny habits you may have in trying to relate to the breath. Sometimes you may find yourself trying to squeeze the breath out. Remember, there’s always breath energy in the body. If you try to squeeze everything out, you’re harming the more subtle levels of breath energy that are there. So if any breath is going to go, allow it to go out as far as it’s going to go on its own. You don’t have to push it further. And when it comes in, you don’t have to pull it in too much. Remember, it’s there on top of the breath energy that’s already there. This way, as the breath is allowed to do its thing, the body feels more comfortable. Old patterns of tension that used to be there in the body can begin to unwind and get released. And you can think of the whole body breathing in and the whole body breathing out. Imagine all the pores in your skin opening up. So there’s nothing in the body that can hold on to the breath. It’s totally open to any breath coming in or any breath going out. And again, when you think of this, you begin to see old patterns of tension beginning to dissolve away. Because there’s always part of us that thinks, “We’re doing the breathing,” and then you identify yourself with certain parts of the body. You tense them up in order to be the doer of the breathing. That just creates problems. So if you sense that, allow it to relax. Think of yourself as a big sponge sitting here. The breath can come in and out all the holes of the sponge. And your only duty is to keep track of it. John Fung used to talk about catching the breath. I would try and try and try to catch it, of course. I would tense up in order to catch it. Until one day I realized you have to just allow it to come in and go out on its own without actually trying to box it in or catch it. I went back and I told him he was teaching me wrong. He laughed and laughed. He said, “That wasn’t what I meant.” He said, “Catch hold of it. Catch sight of it.” That’s what he meant. Keep your eye and the breath right on that level, just the sensation of the breathing coming in and going out. You’re sitting here in the midst of it with all your pores open, your awareness all open, all around. And even though you’re identifying yourself with a particular physical state or a particular mental state, it’s a more skillful state than a lot of the ones we tend to identify with. We go through life. We take the raw materials around us and turn them into our self. And in doing so, we push them around in ways that are unnatural to them. In other words, we’re not friendly with them. We’re making them into what we want them to be without really asking them whether they can be that way or not. And as a result, they let us down. So instead of focusing on our disappointment in the fact that they let us down, we turn around and look at the state of mind that is asking more of them than they can offer. It’s like that comment that Chan Phuong used to make about people who talked about how they were always practicing looking at everything in terms of the three characteristics that are inconstant, stressful, not-self. He would always say, “Turn around and look at what’s making these complaints, complaining about the fact that they’re inconstant, stressful, not-self.” That’s where the real problem lies. We expect them to be something else from what they are. We try to make them be something else from what they are, and then we get disappointed when they don’t fall in line with our wishes. It’s because we’re not looking at their reality. We don’t see the processes of how we take these raw materials, which just present themselves. We decide that we want to latch on to certain sensations because we like them, and then we create a sense of self out of other sensations. We either make a pleasant sensation continue or to get rid of a painful sensation, or to try to maximize the pleasure out of a particular sensation by turning ourselves into the consumer of that sensation. There are lots of different ways in which we create this sense of self as the doer or the consumer. Yet, when you look at the raw materials that we try to build this sense of ourselves out of, it just can’t fill the bill. When you see the stress and discomfort that comes from creating that sense of self, that’s when it’s easier to let go. If we just had one sense of self and let it go, that would be the end of the problem. But we have many ways of creating a sense of self. So you have to catch yourself in the act each time, each time, each time. Otherwise, you let go of a sense of self and then you wonder, “Well, why are there still these problems?” I thought letting go of the sense of self would put an end to problems. Well, it’s one particular sense of self, a particular doer or a particular consumer. You have to realize that you’re not the doer. You have to realize that there are many different levels on which we create our sense of self, many different situations, many different types of self. Although the basic principle is the same across the board, we’re taking raw materials that are not self at all and trying to turn them into something that’s against their nature. Still, you’ve got to see the particulars, because this happens on many different levels of subtlety. So our practice is learning how to be more and more skillful as we create our sense of self, more alert to what we’re doing. It’s in trying to be skillful that we become more alert. Then if we see any particular sense of self that’s unskillful, obviously painful, obviously self-suffering-inducing, then we let it go. And as we let it go, we begin to see the stress and suffering that’s implicit in more subtle types of self. So we’re peeling these things away, step by step by step. You can’t just drop your sense of self, because your basic strategy for happiness involves identifying with certain things. You use your self-strategy more and more skillfully, and you begin to see where not-self becomes a useful strategy as well. Learning not to identify with certain things, not to identify with certain thoughts, certain moods, certain physical states in the body. Whatever causes pain or stress, when you latch onto it, you can let go. You’ve got that opportunity. This is why the Buddha’s insight on “I-making” and “my-making” is so important. If we had a particular sense of self, think of how difficult it would be to change, if it were something that we were given. But because it’s an activity we do again and again and again, you can keep changing your activity. This means there are a lot more potentials, a lot more choices available in the present moment that you can choose from. What are you going to identify with right now? What are you going to let go of right now? You’ve got lots of choices. You’re not committed to holding on to anything at all. It’s your choice. When you see it that way, it’s a lot easier to let go of things, even of things that you’ve held on to for a long time. This is one of the insights that we can apply on every level of the practice, starting from the breath. There are certain ways of breathing that are uncomfortable. You can let go of them, see what you’re doing to make them uncomfortable, and stop doing that. You can get on friendlier and friendlier terms of the breath and be a more skillful friend to the breath. And then take that same type of insight and apply it to the way the mind reacts to things, the way it holds on to things, the way it pushes things away, realizing that if you pay careful attention, you just get more and more skillful. You become alert to more opportunities. You have more choices, more alternatives that are available to you right here and now. And that way, everything in the present moment becomes more and more friendly with one another. In other words, your impulse to latch on to this, latch on to that, gets more skillful because it’s more sensitive to what’s going on. You reach a point where you can let go of everything. That’s where everything gets on good terms, and you realize that all the conflicts, all the problems, are things that you caused. The way of the Accurates will go on its old way, rising and passing away, rising and passing away, but it won’t be issues anymore. The mind is the only thing that comes to mind. It creates the issues. And when it stops creating the issues, there are no issues left. That’s what we’re working toward. And we start on that path by being really friendly with the present moment, being true to it, being sensitive to it. And when we’re a good friend to the breath, then the present starts becoming a good friend to us.

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