Listening to the Body

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When you meditate, you have to take things one step at a time. It’s like a journey. If you think about how many steps you have to take, you wear yourself out before you’ve even taken one or two steps. So you’re going to walk over to Palomar. Your mind goes back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. You don’t know how many times the mind has walked over to Palomar before you’ve even taken a step. This way, it wears itself out. The body takes one step and you take one step. The mind takes one step. And then when the body takes the next step, you’re with that next step. That way, the mind has to go to Palomar only once, instead of a thousand times. And it’s the same with the breath. You’re here with this one breath, but the mind doesn’t stay with the one breath. It thinks, “You’ve got to sit for a whole hour.” And so the mind has been sitting for an hour already, probably two or three or four hours already. And yet the breath has hardly gone through a few minutes. On top of that, you’re anticipating, “What’s the next breath going to be like? When are the results going to come?” That kind of impatience destroys the meditation, because it wears you down. You have to learn how to content yourself with just one breath at a time. If you had just this one breath, how could you make it comfortable? Don’t anticipate what the next breath is going to be like, or when concentration is going to come, or when the sense of ease or rapture you’ve read about is going to come. Just focus on this one breath. Make it comfortable. If you had only one more breath, which part of the body would like to be involved with the breath? Don’t be in a hurry to rush to the end of things. Take each breath as it comes, and go through the body systematically, trying out different spots. Start with the navel. Just watch it for a while. As you breathe in, as you breathe out, you don’t have to go rushing off anywhere else. Just that one spot in the body. If you lose your focus, we’ll come back to that one spot. Tell yourself, “If all you had to do in this world was to breathe in a way that felt nice in the navel, what would that be like?” If you can’t focus on the navel, if that’s too precise, we’ll just say the center of the abdomen. If that’s all you had to do in the world, what would a really good breath feel there? What would it feel like there? Once you’ve had one in-and-out breath, try another one. Ask for concentration and discernment and all those other things. Leave them alone for a while. Just focus on the breath. Then, after you’ve been with the center of the abdomen for a while, try the right side, the lower right-hand corner of the abdomen. Watch that for a while. How does the breathing feel there? If there’s a lot of tension or tightness there, allow it to relax and breathe again. Keep that up for a while. Again, tell yourself, “If there was only this one thing you had to do in the world, how would you do it?” That’s what concentration is all about. Making up your mind that you’re only going to do one thing at a time. As for the chakras, the chattering mind that says, “Well, what about all these other things that need to be done?” You can say, “Not right now. I’ve just got this one thing here.” After you’ve had enough with the right side of the abdomen, try the left. That’s all you’ve got to do right now. If you’re anticipating the results or getting anxious about the results or wondering when they’re going to appear, just let those thoughts go. You’ve only got one thing you’ve got to do right now, and that’s to allow the breathing to feel good in the left side of the abdomen. It’s not much, just one step at a time. It’s when you take on too many things all at once. It’s when you take on too many things all at once that nothing gets done well. Then you can move your attention up to the area around the stomach. That’s all you’re responsible for right now is just the area around the stomach. When you breathe in, how does it feel? When you breathe out, how does it feel? Take each breath one at a time. Lie low here. If you start getting up and trying to have an overview of how things have been going so far in the meditation, how much longer do you have? It’s like knowing there’s sniper fire above your head. If you stick up your head, you’re going to get shot. So stay low. Just stay on the level of how does it feel to breathe right here, right now. When you take things one at a time, how does it feel? When you take things one at a time, it may not be much that gets done at any one time, but at least something gets accomplished. It’s much better than running around and worrying about this and thinking about that and getting impatient and getting frustrated. That accomplishes nothing at all. But if you do things one at a time at the end of the hour, you will have had a lot of things done. Patience is all about being very meticulous about the one thing you’re doing. It doesn’t mean sitting around doing nothing at all. It means doing things one at a time, being very meticulous about the one thing you’re doing. Realizing that the job we have here of training the mind is a big job. And as with any big job, you have to break it down into smaller tasks until you’ve got a task at the size that’s manageable. Then those are the things you do. When you’ve had enough with the stomach, you move over to the right flank. How does that feel as you’re breathing it? What kind of breathing would feel really good in the right flank? And if you’ve never had the time to pay attention to your right flank, well, now is some good time to do it. It’s like what they said about in the future everybody will have fifteen minutes of fame. Well, when you meditate, each part of the body gets a couple of minutes of really nice breathing. And if you’re too busy rushing off to get enlightened or whatever, but you leave the different parts of your body behind, each part of the body doesn’t get a chance to have a good breath, well, you’ve really neglected the work you need to do. It’s in the little things, paying attention to the little things, that the larger work gets done. If there are other things in life that are too important, the really necessary work doesn’t get done. You find the things that are too important when you really look at them are not really all that important at all. There’s a lot of hype about how you have to do this, how you have to do that. You can’t even allow yourself to breathe properly. There’s something really wrong with your priorities. So as you meditate, you get your priorities straight. All you have to do is breathe in a way that feels good. That’s it. And all the other things that you’re going to learn in the meditation are going to be found right there. So this is not something you rush through so you can get to the next stage. It’s by doing this stage properly that the next stages will appear, will develop. So once the right flank feels good, then you can move over to the left flank. Give that some time as well. Just keep going through the body, section by section, taking it one section at a time. When you do that, the qualities that you’re looking for will come on their own without you having to think about them. Mindfulness, alertness, sensitivity, intentness. So don’t be in too great a hurry to get to the big things. If you try to rush to the big things, you’ll find there’s nothing there. But if you have time for the little things, you’ll find that’s where the big things grow from. When I was staying with the Chan Fung, a lot of the training was in the little things, cleaning the sipa dunes properly. Learning how to scrub a floor properly. Learning how to walk on a hut that was up on stilts. Walking in such a way that you didn’t shake the hut. Just pay attention with each step. If you take time for each step, each step will then teach you some good lessons in mindfulness. But if you’re too busy, if you’re rushing off to whatever’s next, whatever’s next, those little steps won’t have the opportunity to teach you the lessons. A monk I know in Bangkok is affiliated with a school for novices. It’s not at the monastery where he stays. So he wants to go and check out how things are going at the school. He doesn’t go and ask the principal. He goes and he finds a couple of little novices and takes them off for a walk. It gives him a chance to talk about what they want to talk about. He learns an awful lot about what’s going on in the school that way. It’s the little unimportant things that can teach you the most important lessons. This breath, this breath, this breath. We tend to ignore them. We say, “Well, the breath can do its own work. I don’t have to pay any attention to it. I’ve got more important things to do.” As a result, the lessons that the breath might have to teach you just don’t get taught, because there’s nobody to listen. So listen, each breath at a time. Come up to the area around the heart. How does that feel when you breathe in? Is that the best it could feel? Can it feel better if you breathe in another way? Well, look at it. Give it a chance to tell you. As far as where all this is going to lead, you don’t have to worry. It leads you more and more and more into the present moment. We’re not heading off someplace in the future. We’re heading into the present moment. The gateway to the present moment is the little things that are happening right here. So don’t be too busy or too important or in too much of a hurry. Pay attention to the little sensations of the breath in different parts of the body. Continue this survey of the body about this rate, section by section by section. If you complete it within the hour, fine. If you don’t, that’s fine as well. The qualities we’re trying to develop in the mind are not developed by rushing through things. They’re developed by paying attention. Paying attention means that you’re not too important to learn the lessons that the little sensations of the breath might have to tell you. A lot of the most important lessons I learned in Thailand were from developing the attitude that there was no work that was beneath me. Cleaning the toilets, picking up other people’s messes, all the little things that needed to be done in order to keep the monastery well-run. It’s the same with the meditation. Each part of the body has a little lesson to tell you. Each breath has a little lesson. Over time, you’ll figure out which parts have the most important lessons to teach you, but you won’t know what that is or what they are until you’ve listened to everything that every little part of the body has to say. It’s about what kind of breathing feels best right now. It’s all pretty simple. It’s just a question of “Does it feel good? Does it not feel good?” It’s nothing too complicated. It’s simply a question of listening carefully. Not being too great of a hurry to rush off somewhere else, because the knowledge that leads to the end of suffering doesn’t lie somewhere else. It lies in developing the attitude that’s willing to look at the little things. To see what they hold inside.

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