Reading the Body & Mind

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Gentlely once compare the breath as your home when you meditate, the place you go to first. Try to settle down and find a sense of ease and comfort. Start out with a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths to see how long it takes to feel. And if it feels good, keep it up. If it starts not feeling good, then you can change. Try to notice where you feel the process of breathing in the body. And watch those sensations to see when they tell you, “Okay, the breath has now come in long enough, it’s time to stop and let it go out. When it’s gone out, how far out is long enough before it starts getting too long? Learn how to read what the body’s telling you. And allow the breath to find a rhythm and a texture that feels good. And think of the breath energy going into different parts of the body that you’re not normally associated with breathing, down into different parts of your abdomen, down your back, in your arms, in your legs, in your head. Think of the breath energy as the energy that nourishes your blood vessels, nourishes your nerves, all the way out to every little pore in the skin. Then try to hold that perception in mind as you breathe in, as you breathe out. That’s reading the breath, trying to find a sense of being at home with the breath. And sometimes you find the mind immediately takes to the breath without much trouble. At other times, there’s a problem. That’s when you have to learn how to read the mind to see what the problem is. It’s a simple matter of too much energy or too little energy. Or there are specific issues that are getting in the way. Pose that question and see what comes up. In other words, if the mind has trouble staying with the breath, you’ve got to go out into what Ajahn Lee calls your foraging places, places where you go to find the medicine or the food you need to counteract an imbalance in the mind. If it’s a simple matter of too much energy or too little energy, sometimes working with the breath will make a difference. Otherwise, you don’t go out simply for the most comfortable breath. If there’s too little energy, try to breathe in a way that feels more energizing. It may not feel comfortable to begin with. Long in-breaths, short out-breaths. Long in-breaths, short out-breaths. See what that does if your energy is feeling low. Or if you have trouble staying with one spot, just tell yourself,”I’ll stay with the breath in one spot for three breaths and then move to another spot for three breaths and another spot for three breaths.” This can sometimes wake you up. But if you can’t do it with the breath, then you’ve got to analyze things and pose that question to the mind. What’s the problem with the mind? Sometimes it’s some issue that you’ve carried in from the day, or it’s a particular desire you’re feeling right now, or it’s just some anger, laziness, a kind of depressing feeling when you don’t feel you can handle this. There are antidotes for all these. This is what you go foraging for, looking for the antidotes. The antidote for laziness is contemplation of death, contemplation that we had just now. We’re all subject to aging, illness, and death. So what are you going to do about it? Some people feel, “Well, there’s really nothing much you can do. You can’t prepare.” That’s not the case at all. You can prepare. This is why we’re meditating. As aging comes, as illness comes, as death arrives, you’re going to need really strong qualities. You’re going to need a sense of discernment, concentration, mindfulness to get you through. And if you don’t work on them now, when are you going to work on them? Because there’s no guarantee that we’re going to see the sunrise tomorrow. People rarely wake up in the morning and realize, “This is going to be my last day.” It catches them mid-sentence, mid-phrase, in the middle of some other activity. And we should be ready to go if that happened. And sometimes that contemplation is enough to get you back, willing to look at the breath. If it’s a matter of anger over some issue, over some person, you can ask yourself, “What does the anger do for me?” It’s usually someone that you have dealings with on a very close basis. So you can ask yourself, “Has that person done only bad things?” Well, no. Try to think of the good things they’ve done. And if that doesn’t work, try to think of the fact that if you let yourself get entangled in this, who at the moment is getting burned up by the anger? Are they being burned by your anger right now? No, but you’re being burned. Your whole house is aflame. And again, it helps to look at things in the larger perspective. If you were on your deathbed, would you like to have this thought come in and consume your mind? Well, no. The thing is, when you’re approaching death, the mind gets very weak, and things do come in, whether you want them or not. But if you’ve had practice in undercutting them, seeing through the anger, seeing through the whatever, it’s a lot easier to let go. So here’s your chance. Here’s a time to practice letting go of the anger. Spread thoughts of goodwill first to yourself, because after all, that’s one of the primary reasons for wanting to get rid of the anger, is realizing that you’re harming yourself by feeding on it. You’ve got better things to feed on. And even if that person who’s been bad to you has no redeeming characteristics at all, you’ve got to develop a sense of pity for that person. They’re just digging themselves deeper and deeper and deeper into a big hole. If you were to wish for them to meet with a bad end, well, when people meet with a bad end, does that put an end to their bad behavior? Well, no. Sometimes it makes it worse. Often it makes it worse. So when you’re wishing goodwill for the other person, it’s not so much, “May they be happy however they are.” The wish is, “May they find the causes for true happiness and act on them.” If the problem is lust, you’ve got the 32 parts of the body. Just go through them. Which part of the body are you lusting for? Are you lusting for the liver, the stomach, the intestines, the bones? When you start thinking about the body in these terms, you realize that lust has to depend on a very narrow range of focus. All you have to do is take the skin off the body and you realize there’s not much there that you would really lust for. And again, it’s not just the object, it’s also the lust in and of itself. Why do you like to feed on the lust? What gratification do you get out of it? It wears you out, it wears you down. It makes you ill at ease in the present moment. And if you were to act on it, where would that take you? First you might think about the good things, but then you’ve got to think about it all around again. The foolish things you do, the results that would come from acting on the lust that are not so pleasant, that are not so desirable. The mind likes to think of only the good things and blocks out the other things. But to be honest with yourself, you’ve got to look at the whole picture. If the problem settling down is that you feel discouraged in the practice, think about the good things you’ve done in the past, the goodness you have developed. The times when you’ve been generous, simply out of the goodness of your heart, not because you had to give a gift, but because you wanted to give a gift. The times when you could have harmed somebody else, but you didn’t, because it didn’t feel right. Think about that. You can remind yourself that you do have some goodness. Or you can think about the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha. Develop a sense of being inspired. This craft we’re working on here, this skill we’re trying to develop, it was found by someone and taught by someone who gave it as a pure gift. In other words, once the Buddha had attained awakening and he taught, it wasn’t because he needed anything from anyone else. It was simply that he saw people were suffering and he wanted to offer this practice as a kind of medicine, as a kind of cure for their suffering. To begin with, he had all kinds of riches and wealth. He could have lived to be a king, but he chose not to. He saw there was something more important in life. That kind of person is rare to find. The kind of teacher who teaches purely out of generosity, that’s hard to find, too. So what we’re working on here is something really special. It’s been passed down for more than 2,000 years, which doesn’t mean that it’s old. It’s been passed down because it’s good. And here’s our chance to practice it. If you’re sitting here discouraged by the fact that your meditation was better in the past than it is right now, the cure for that is to remind yourself what caused the meditation to be good then. It’s because you were focusing totally on the present moment. You were not thinking about the past. And if that past attainment really was good, it wouldn’t have let you down now. So it’s a sign that there’s work to be done. And it’s to be done by focusing right here, right now. It’s just this one breath. Okay, make it just this one breath. The mind wanders off. Remind yourself that each time you catch the mind wandering off and you bring it back, you’re developing an important skill. And the habits of meditation are strengthened as you work on them. So there really is value in catching the mind and bringing it back. You catch it again, you bring it back a hundred times, how many times, it doesn’t matter. Each time you catch it, you’re strengthening your mindfulness, strengthening your alertness. And you can take some satisfaction in that. A lot of times the problem in meditation is that you’ve got a particular result in mind and it’s not coming. But remember that when the mind settles down, there are lots of different ways that it can settle down. And the contours of your meditation can take on many different shapes. So this is your opportunity to explore something new. The mind, when it’s in this particular condition, whatever it is, how you deal with it, how you don’t get discouraged by it. If none of these methods work, just sit there and watch. Let’s just watch here for a while, see what’s going on. Maybe you haven’t read the mind carefully enough. Maybe you haven’t read the breath carefully enough. Just watch for a while, without thinking that you’re going to do anything at all, and see what you notice. You might think of being a meditator as being a carpenter. A carpenter has to have lots of tools. And sometimes the carpenter gets good wood to work with, and sometimes the carpenter gets bad wood to work with. But if you’re going to be a good carpenter, you want to figure out what good things can I make even out of the bad wood, the wood that’s crooked, the wood that’s got problems. And when you have that attitude, that’s when you really expand your skill.

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