The Presence of the Body

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When you start meditating, you’re not asked to do much. Just be present to the presence of your body. Where do you feel your body right now? What does it feel like to have a body right now? Just stay with that sensation. That’s the hard part, is staying there. Because the question is always, “What’s next?” And the answer here is, “This is what’s next.” You say, “What’s going to happen here?” Well, just watch. It’s like making scrambled eggs. The best ones are the ones where the heat is very low and you stir and stir and stir, and it looks like nothing’s happening to the eggs at all. Then gradually they coagulate. It requires a fair amount of patience. Then there’s the conviction that this is an important place to be, right where you are present to the presence of your body. And Chan Lee analyzes things. He says that all eight factors of the eightfold path are right here, how you relate to how you sense your body here in the present, with the breath as the medium. Remind yourself that the breath is how you sense the body when there’s a sensation of being present to the body. There’s breath everywhere in the body. In some parts of the body it’s more obvious than others. And immediately, as you want things to happen, you’ll start pushing the breath here, pushing the breath there, pushing the energy here, clamping down on thoughts, which makes it unpleasant to be here. And then you find yourself out someplace. Remember when the Buddha talked about the five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts? The name of the sutta is “The Relaxation of Thoughts.” That’s one of the methods, and it’s one that’s highlighted by the title. Try to be so present to the body that when a thought begins to appear, you see it also as a stirring someplace in the body, a little bit of a knot of tension or a little tangle of tension. And see if you can comb it out. Smooth it out, zap it, whatever’s needed to get things back to a simple presence of the energy of the body here. Think of this as a balancing act. There’s a fair amount of skill involved in staying here and not clamping down too heavily on the breath or too heavily on your sense of the body. At the same time, you’re not having such a light touch that you begin to drift off. You’re not using your sense of the presence of the body. Think of this as your territory. This is your home. No one else can sense the body the way you do. They have their bodies, they sense their bodies. But your sense of your body, that’s yours. And it’s in this area where the Buddha focuses his attention. So you want to be able to stay here continually so you can actually get a sense of what’s going on. All the various Buddhist concepts, if you’ve been here for a while, make most sense. You’ve gotten used to the skills that are needed for staying here. And learn how to look at your thoughts, not from the inside of the thought, but look at them from being here present with the body, and a thought bubble begins to form. And you say, “Oh, this is how thoughts form.” But you don’t get involved, and the bubble bursts, and that’s it. The problem is we’re so enamored of our thoughts. And it’s like playing with computers. Computers are extremely quick to respond to whatever desire we have. All you have to do is type in the URL for any website you want, and there it is. And we complain if it takes a few seconds for it to download. We like things fast. And this is why there are certain ways of thinking that we’re used to, that we’re good at. We tend to go back to those again and again and again. Our education systems foster that attitude. If you’re good at something, they’ll channel you in that direction. We very rarely get the skills that are needed to get good at something you’re not immediately good at. It requires a certain amount of patience and a certain amount of deliberateness and determination, the ability to not get discouraged when things aren’t happening quickly, which means learning how to talk to yourself in a way that gets you encouraged, lifts your morale. I may not be able to do this well right now, but let’s keep at it, keep at it. That right there makes a huge difference. So there’s the simplicity of this, just being present to the presence of your body. But having the right touch, that takes time. There’s a skill. And if you want to occupy yourself with figuring things out, we’ll try to figure that out. What’s the right amount of pressure for your focus? We’re talking about adjusting the breath. How do you do it in a way that the breath actually does feel good while you’re adjusting it? It’s all too easy to start squeezing things here and squeezing things there to adjust the breath, but that doesn’t help. How do you relax the breath into a good state of energy? Take that as your challenge so it feels just right. Your awareness is just right for the sense of the body. The sense of the body is just right for your awareness. They fit snugly and continually. As I said, it’s something simple, but it’s not all that easy. The hard part is sticking with it. But make that part of the story you’re telling yourself. We’re going to learn how to stick with something, and this is something good to start with. There was a student in Asia who seems to live his life for the purpose of having good stories to tell about his life. And it’s a habit that’s got him through a lot of difficulties, things that don’t discourage other people. The point of the story always was, in spite of the difficulties, he was able to make his way through. Make that your story. In spite of your fears, in spite of your distractions, you didn’t let it get you down. You figured some way to work your way through. And if the problem is impatience, remember that patience is one of the main virtues. When the Buddha gave us Avada Baddhi Mokkha, which was when he was first summarizing the teachings before he sent his first big band of students out to teach, he started with patience and endurance. That was the beginning of the summary of the teachings. So if nothing else, say you learn some patience, which in this case means if you find yourself slipping away from the presence of your body, you come right back and do it again and again and again. Don’t let yourself get discouraged by the number of times you slip off. Be encouraged by the number of times you can come back. And then figure out some way to reward yourself. What will feel really good in the breath right now when you come back? Well, give yourself at least one really good breath. And then while you’re at it, why stop? Maybe one, maybe two, maybe three. Maybe after the fourth breath, something else will feel better. So breathe in another way. Let this issue of breath energy in the body capture your imagination so you can stick with it long enough so that the results finally do come, like the eggs that finally coagulate. And then, of course, you run into other problems, but at that point you’ve mastered this particular skill. And this is what you want to have as a good part of your foundation. Because you find yourself coming back to it again and again. Just having the right balance, the right sense of presence. You’re present for the presence of the body. The body is always present there for you. All that’s required is that you make yourself present. And keep coming back.

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