Patience & Sensitivity

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The Chinese often make the point that when you begin meditating, you would take a survey first of your body and mind. How are things right now? Before you focus on the breath, get started in what you plan to do for the evening. See what raw materials you have. What state is the body in? What state is the mind in? They talk metaphorically. They say, is your mind leading forward or leading back, to the left or the right? Forward or back, of course, would be leading to the future or the past. Left or right would be focusing on things you like or things you don’t like. And how’s the breath in the body? We do have this tendency, as soon as we focus on the breath, to try to fit it into a mold. That’s something you’ve got to learn how to avoid doing. Because once it gets fit into a mold, it’s not going to feel very comfortable. How would you feel fit into a mold? Let the breath have some freedom. You’re not around it, squeezing it in, squeezing it out. You’re surrounded by the breath. There’s no limitations on it. Let the surface of your body be very vaguely defined. Some people notice that when they’re breathing in, breathing out, or just with the breath, the energy of the body, it doesn’t stop at the skin. It goes out a little bit further. Some people can see the auras of other people. In some cases, the auras are just a few inches above the skin. In other cases, they’re much larger. So think of your breath body as not being encompassed by the physical body. It’s not encompassed by the earth element. How does it feel before you try to put it through its paces? Notice that. And if it already feels good, allow it to stay feeling good. If it feels tight or constricted, what can you do to loosen up some of those restrictions? We talk about having a sense of urgency in the practice, but you also have to be patient. You’ve got to listen to what the body needs. After all, think of it as developing a friendship. If you just move in on somebody, say, “You’re going to be my friend, and you’re going to do what I tell you to do,” they’re going to run away. Even then, they’re going to clam up. But if you are sensitive to what they like, what they need, they’re going to be willing to open up. Just think of that. You want the breath to open up. That’s for you, rather than you’re imposing the ideas you picked up, say, from a John Lee’s book or anything else you may have read about breath meditation. Let the breath have its say. And if it’s bashful, shy, have some patience with it. Because sometimes the bashful and shy people are the ones who are most worth knowing. John Lee’s images of trying to create a friendship and asking questions. How does the breath feel in your hands right now? How does it feel in your arms? He says sometimes it’ll answer. Sometimes it won’t answer at all, but you keep on asking questions. After a while, it’ll give you a one-word answer. You ask some more questions, and it begins to open up. Try to be like the reporter who tries to catch people off guard by asking innocent questions. When the questions don’t seem aggressive, the person who’s being interviewed tends to open up a little bit more. Unintentional things. Maybe you’re trying to establish a friendship, but the fact that they open up and you learn unintentional things from them, that’s a good sign. Because then you can work with that. So try to be sensitive to what is going on right now as you begin to settle down. And have some patience. The more sensitive you are, the more you’re going to see. Because that’s what your discernment is going to be ultimately. Your sensitivity. You’re not trying to impose the Buddhist concepts on your experience. You’re trying to use those concepts as tools for opening up. Becoming sensitive to areas you weren’t sensitive to before. It’s like a person who learns how to be a professional taster. They have to learn a huge vocabulary. The subtle differences in tastes. The subtleties are there, but if you don’t have a vocabulary for them, you’re not going to notice them. But what you see there is a vocabulary that alerts you to distinctions. You get more and more subtle. And more and more observant. In particular, you’re going to get observant to what does the mind do? Is it shaping the present moment? You see this originally with the breath. We talked about this today. Often as soon as you focus on the breath, things tighten up. Or can you focus without the tightening up? Why does the tightening up have to go with the focus? Sometimes it has to do with our preconceived notions of what it means to be focused. Sometimes it has to do with our ideas of what has to be done to make the breath do X or Y. And you squeeze it. We’re not here to squeeze things. We’re here to let things open up. So the things you haven’t seen before get revealed. And what are you going to see? When the Buddha talks about his awakening, it’s interesting to notice that he never talks in terms of the three characteristics or the three perceptions. It’s always in terms of the Four Noble Truths. And the truth is about action and result. There are unskillful mental actions that lead to suffering, skillful actions that lead to the end of suffering. And the awakening is to see that that’s actually true. Some people describe awakening as giving ascent to the three characteristics, saying, “Oh yeah, that really is true.” What does that do? What does it change? The change comes when you look in terms of the Four Noble Truths, you actually do the path, and it does lead you to something new, the end of suffering. That’s how it can be said that you know the Four Noble Truths. You’ve actually done the duties. You’ve seen the results. And to get that kind of insight, the Buddha has that five-step program. And it’s important to notice that it is derived from the Four Noble Truths. Origination. That’s the first step. Seeing the origination. Of course, that has to do with the Second Noble Truth, which is the truth of the origination of suffering, and then seeing passing away. That’s how you make sure that, yes, this cause really does lead to this effect. Because sometimes things come together at the same time, and it’s just a coincidence. A Thai farmer who goes into a market and he sees a neon light. He blows on it. Well, it so happens that the neon light is time to turn off at that point. So he thinks he’s blown out the light. Then it comes back on again. He blows on it again. This time it doesn’t go out. He gets frustrated. He shouldn’t be frustrated. He’s just learned that the first cause, in fact, is really related. So you want to see the moments when, say, craving passes away. The suffering does go away. That’s when you know, OK, you’ve got a cause here. That clarifies the Second Noble Truth and its relationship to the First. Then there’s the question of allure. Here again, you’re focusing on the craving. Where is the focal point of the craving? As the Buddha said, you have to locate the craving. If you really want to understand it. So you crave a person. Where exactly is your craving focused? A perception? A thought construct? Your way of talking to yourself? Images you hold in mind? Words you say to yourself? Often, when we’re attracted to somebody, it has very little to do with the actual person. More to our ideas about ourselves in relationship to that. Or memories of someone else we’ve known in the past. This is why relationships can be so difficult. Because you don’t even know where your cravings are focused. And the other person has no idea where your cravings are focused. You get into a lot of trouble. It’s the allure. What exactly is the alluring perception, or the alluring thought, that is the focal point of your craving? Then you look for the drawbacks. That’s what the path is for. This is where you bring in the three perceptions. Whatever it is you crave, whatever the allure is, you want to see that it is inconstant, it is stressful. It’s not worth calling yourself, or you, or yours. Because you’re trying to induce dispassion. That’s the third noble truth. So this five-step program is directly related to the four noble truths. Because it sees that the problem is not so much your misunderstanding that something is constant, easeful, or self. It’s more an issue of what are you doing, and why. You don’t even know. That not knowing, that’s the ignorance that lies at the root of all suffering. So you’re trying to dig out why you do things, and what the results are. That’s called penetrative knowledge of arising and passing away. That’s the insight that can open things up in the mind. And to do this kind of analysis, again, requires some patience. And it requires sensitivity. You can’t just rush in. Because again, the Buddha’s not asking you to impose his ideas on your experience. He’s asking you to use these ideas as keys for unlocking things that you can see for yourself. So try to be patient and sensitive. Ours is an impatient culture. And our education system doesn’t teach us how to be patient about things that we’re not immediately good at. Then notice you’re good at X, they’ll channel you into X. If you’re not so good at Y, well, then you let somebody else be good at Y. They’re looking for what they can get out of you. And for the sake of your own happiness, there are some things that you may not be good at right away, but you’ve got to learn how to be patient and stick with it. There’s that cartoon of the two penguins on an ice floe. One is playing the piano, the other has a straw hat and a cane. And one of them says to the other, “No, no, take it again from the top. This is our only ticket out of here.” You know how much work a penguin would have to do to dance and play the piano? And they’re obviously not very good at it. Their flippers are not made for it. But you get the idea. Sometimes you have to really work at something if you want to escape the ice floe. And it may take time. But at least you’re headed in the right direction. Always keep that thought in mind.

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