

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. Say, you're planning 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 and back before you've even taken a step. In this way, it wears itself out. The right way is that the body takes one step and the mind takes one step with it. Then the body takes a step, you're with that next step. That way, the mind has to go to Palomar only once instead of a thousand times.

It's the same with the breath. You're here with this one breath—but the mind doesn't stay with this one breath. It thinks about how you've got to sit for the whole hour, and suddenly the mind has been sitting for an hour already, probably two or three or four hours already. Yet the breath has hardly gone through a few minutes. On top of that, you're anticipating what the next breath is going to be like, what results are going to come. That kind of impatience destroys the meditation because it wears you down. You have to learn how to content yourself with this 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 a 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 parts 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, come back to that one spot. And 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 or if that's too precise a spot, well, just say, the general center of the abdomen. If that's all you had to do, what kind of breath would really feel good there? And once you've had one good in-and-out breath, how about trying another one? As for concentration and discernment, all those other things you might be aiming at, leave them alone for a while. Just focus on the breath.

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 then breathe again. Keep that up for a while. Again, tell yourself: If there were 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 to do one thing at a time. As for the chattering mind that says, "What about all these other things that need to be done?" you can say, "Not right now. I've got to get this one thing here."

After you've had enough of the right side of the abdomen, try the left. That's all you've got to do right now. And as far as anticipating the results, or getting anxious about the results, 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 on 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 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: 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 above yourself to have an overview of how things have been going so far in the meditation, how much longer till you have, it's like knowing that sniper fire is just above about head. You stick up your head, you 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, it may not be much that gets done in any one time, but at least something gets accomplished. Much better than running around and worrying about this or that responsibility, getting impatient, getting frustrated. That accomplishes nothing at all. But if you do things one at a time, at the end of the hour, you would have had a lot of things done.

This is what patience is all about. 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 going, 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 the tasks at a manageable size. Then those are the things you do.

When you've had enough of the stomach, then 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? If you've never had the time to pay attention to your right flank, now's some good time to do it.

It's like what they said about how in the future, everybody will have 15 minutes of fame. Well, when you meditate, each part of the body gets a couple of minutes of really nice breathing. If you're too busy rushing off to get enlightened or whatever but you leave the different parts of your body behind, no part of the body gets a chance to have a good breath. You've really neglected the work you need to do.

It's in paying attention to little things, that the large work gets done. If other things in life are too important, the really necessary work doesn't get done. You find that 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 on 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. All the other things that you're going to learn in the meditation will 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 promptly 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. 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 your 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 find there's nothing there. But if you have time for the little things, you find that's where the big things grow from.

When I was staying with Ajaan Fuang, a lot of the training was in the little things: cleaning the spittoons properly. Learning how to scrub the floor properly. Learning how to walk on a hut that was up on stilts in such way that you didn't shake the hut. You had to 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 their opportunity to teach you their lessons.

A monk I know in Bangkok is affiliated with a school for novices. It's not at the monastery where he stays, so when 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. That gives them a chance to talk about what they want to talk about, and he learns an awful lot about what's going on in 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 think, "Well, the breath can do its work. I don't have to pay 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 across, because nobody's listening.

So listen. Each breath, one 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? Would it feel better if you breathed in another way? Well, look at it. Give it a chance to tell you. And as far as where all this is going to lead, you don't have to worry. It leads 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, and 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 to pay attention to little sensations in the breath in different parts of the body. Continue this survey of body at 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. After all, the qualities we're trying to develop in the mind are not developed by rushing through things. They develop by paying attention. And paying attention means that you're not too important to learn the lessons that the little sensations in the breath might have to tell you.

A lot of the most important lessons I learned in Thailand came from having developed the attitude that there was no work there 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. And 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 which they are until you've listened to everything that every little part of the body has to say, about what kind of breathing feels best right now. It's all pretty simple. Just a question: Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? It's nothing too complicated, simply a question of listening carefully, and not being in too great of a hurry to rush off somewhere else.

After all, the knowledge that leads to the end of suffering doesn't lie somewhere else. It lies in developing an attitude that's willing to look at the little things, to see what they hold inside.