

Practice Note: Receiving Sensations

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on September 28, 2011

If you read the instructions the Buddha gave for meditation practice, he uses two sets of verbs for what you actually do when you meditate. One set includes synonyms in the category of seeing, observing and watching. Another set of verbs has to do with touching, feeling and experiencing. There's quite a difference between touching and seeing. Seeing is usually more removed, and touching is something you do quite intimately. At different times in meditation, one or the other of those two approaches is appropriate. But the Buddha often used verbs having to do with touching, feeling and experiencing directly in the beginning when the meditator gets settled down, focused, and arrives in the present moment. There is something about experiencing what's going on via tactile sensations that helps ground us in the present moment.

Watching can sometimes encourage thinking about things and being a little bit removed. So don't just watch the breathing, but actually be in your body and feel it, experience it, from the inside. Be embodied as you do it. Also, when you do walking meditation, don't watch the sensations of the feet, but almost be in the feet to experience walking.

There are two ways you could say that we feel, sense or are touched by something. One is more active and the other is more receptive. The active mode is like reaching out to touch something, whereas the receptive mode is being touched. I find in meditation that it is often useful to take a receptive approach. So for whatever is happening in the present moment, you can explore how it actually feels in a tactile, physical and embodied way, for example receiving the sensations of thinking a lot or of feeling whatever you're feeling. Whatever is going on, refer it back.

If there is a really loud sound outside you can do listening, but you could also ask, "How does that feel?" When big bass music comes by in another car, you kind of vibrate – you can feel the sensations almost tactually. Or when you're outside on a cool day, if you can feel what's happening in a receptive mode, you can take in and receive the sunrays coming to warm you. Or on a warm day, you don't go out to grab onto the nice cool breeze against your cheek, but you receive it. Likewise, when you experience what's going on with your breathing, can you somehow receive it into the body, almost like it's going to nourish or comfort you? You open yourself to feel and receive it.

In walking meditation, don't lean into it and reach down to watch the experience of the steps, but rather settle back and let yourself receive the sensations that come into play as your feet do the stepping. This receptive mode of feeling and sensing helps us to ground and arrive in the present moment.

If these kinds of ideas are somehow interesting for you, you might experiment with them today in your practice. Thank you.