

First Tuesday Instructions

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Online Hybrid Insight Retreat

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There is a beautiful quote by a Tantric sage, Saraha:

“Here, in this body, are the sacred rivers. Here are the sun and moon, as well as all the pilgrimage places. I have not encountered another temple as blissful as my own body.”

So, as we continue to set aside our memories and thoughts, or ideas, or agendas, and bring our attention to the sensations of our bodies, just the way they are now, here and now, we find that the quality of the determination is significant. We can do so with the uplifting of the heart in inspiration or with the tightness of striving.

If we were to hike a steep mountain trail out of an inspiration of just seeing the beauty at the top, the heart can be light even if the climb is challenging. When I'm inspired, I tend to feel like I'm smiling all the time, even if it's a little Buddha smile. But we can be vigilant when we hike, paying careful attention to the changing terrain, which is sometimes very narrow, like the little ledge Gil was talking about that he crossed. Or maybe it's a wide berth. We can then see the obstacles on the path clearly so we can keep going. We can be ardent and resolute, with inspiration keeping the motivation alive, the warmth of inspiration, the warmth of our motivation.

If we contract into striving, still determined to get there (and we likely will) – to accomplish it, to get to the top with a grin-and-bear-it attitude, striving comes with tensions in the body, maybe the face or shoulders; maybe we're clenching our hands. And there's a certain sense of fatigue we go through because of all the extra tension, and we just strive harder. And it can feel very different. The whole experience is a completely different journey – not smiling.

In the same way, determination in practice that's rooted in inspiration for freedom already has freedom in it. The heart of inspiration already has freedom in it.

The quality rooted in striving has inherent tensions associated with striving. And we can build concentration through striving: I'm going to get there. I'm going to do ten whole breaths. I'm going to stay there the whole hour. But that kind of concentration tends to be brittle and fall apart. In the deeper stages of concentration, the requirement is contentment. It's a sense of ease, a sense of connection.

Since we practice with the *sutta*'s instruction:

Breathing in I experience the whole body.

Breathing out, I experience the whole body.

Breathing in, I calm the body sensations.

Breathing out, I calm the body sensations.

So as we settle into our bodily experience, the unhelpful, unnecessary bodily tensions of striving can become more obvious and can be seen clearly. And we can allow them to release themselves just by seeing them, giving them room. We don't force them to release themselves; we allow them to. And if there are any tensions we find that don't relax, we can relax around them, soften around them. No need to resist them, no need to make them wrong. Just be relaxed about them, calm about them, allowing them, staying simple with them. This practice of mindfulness, mindfulness of the body, is the befriending of the body, of being at home, fully at home in our bodies.

So if you haven't yet, close your eyes, fully settle into your meditation posture, sitting here in this time and place, in this body, in this room, on this earth. Allow yourself to be centered on your body, to connect with the body globally...

And from within the body, as part of the body, become aware of your breathing, however you experience it, noticing what moves as you breathe. Just notice however it is right now, receiving in awareness the sensations of breathing in an open-handed way...

Maybe you are attuned to the larger movements of breathing, large swathes of the body breathing, the rib cage moving, the chest, the spine, the belly. Or maybe you are attuned to the smaller movements of your breath, the breath in this body, part of this body...

However it is, be at ease with it...

Knowing your breathing in and knowing your breathing out...

Allowing the attention to expand...

Breathing in I experience the whole body.

Breathing out, I experience the whole body.

Sensing the body globally... breathing in, breathing out...

And as the attention is settled in the whole body, if you notice any bodily sensations arise, you can calm the bodily sensations.

Breathing in, I calm the bodily sensations.

Breathing out, I calm the bodily sensations.

I calm the bodily tensions. I calm the bodily formations...

Letting go of any way there's bracing or tensing against staying intimate...

You might become aware now of any stillness, of calm in the midst of the movements of the breath in this body, in the midst of the sensations of the body... any sense of well-being even if you're uncomfortable in some way...

Breathing in, breathing out, experiencing the whole body like a vast lake, settled, quiet, spread out. Maybe there are waves or ripples, calming.

Settled there, settled in the experience of breathing, breathing in and breathing out. Any bodily tensions that arise are just waves in the water arising and disappearing into the stillness...

This quote from the Buddha has been a guiding principle for me in this practice. Having my bodily experience, so much of my life, feel like my problem, it took me some years for this to penetrate in a way that was really meaningful and practical for me:

There is one thing that, when cultivated and regularly practiced, leads to deep spiritual intention, to peace, to mindfulness and clear comprehension, to vision and knowledge, to a happy life here and now and to the culmination of wisdom and awakening. What is that one thing? Mindfulness centered on the body.

And next, we're going to do a walking period. I'd like to share that, in a number of my first retreats – quite a few, to be honest about it – I kept hearing this thing about continuity, but somewhere, I didn't really believe it. And so, I would kind of dab at it, play at it. I remember reading an article, and I may not have it exactly right, but it was by Sharon Salzberg, and I think it was called *The Torture of Continuity*. It led to a wise point. But that was the start of my beginning to consider that continuity really had value. Then I sat my first retreat where I committed myself – that it was more important for me in this retreat to learn continuity than how my sits went. And so I really focussed. And, as I mentioned at the opening, I had my walking meditation begin with that first intention to stand up while I was sitting. And then I used to go into my room, close the door, and mindfulness wet out the door with that closing of the door. And so I would just carry it with me. Over the course of the retreat, I saw a change from this duty, this work I was doing, to coming home, coming home, coming home.

And so, when you get up to walk, just continue this mindfulness of the body as a path to full awakening. Thank you.