

Knowing, Feeling, Relaxing

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I am ever ready to take everything as a good, auspicious sign. It was wonderfully auspicious that it rained a teeny bit last night, as I was at the beginning of the retreat. And it's wonderfully auspicious that now the sunlight is shining into this room, and on some of the tiles on Zoom also, you can see the sunshine coming in.

And this idea from the introductory talk last night, that even the big Ganges River, flowing powerfully, silently through the plains of northern India, begins with a raindrop, maybe high up in the Himalayas. A single drop. I've had a single first drop of rain fall on my skin, my forehead, or face, and I was filled with delight. I knew then that rain was coming.

And in this practice we do, the single drop of rain is a moment of awareness, the moment of mindfulness. And it helps to start building this continuity. First maybe of a trickling little stream, smaller than a stream, a little trickle.

It is to not just know, not just be mindful of the present, not just sense what's happening in the moment, but somehow let it register more deeply what you just did, what you're doing, almost like you're a sponge for the goodness of mindfulness. You're a sponge for the goodness of feeling and sensing what's happening. Like you're available for the good influence of mindfulness, of awareness.

The theme of this retreat is the conditionality, how conditions in place support other things to happen. Other things arise because the conditions are there. The conditions are the influence.

And a single drop of mindfulness can be overlooked, can be dismissed. The fact that just a moment, and then you're off thinking, can actually be the opposite, that create conditions for discouragement, for being upset, being angry, being critical of yourself. That's a very different condition. The rudder's pointing in a very different way.

And to make a habit of seeing everything in practice as auspicious is wonderful. One moment is not insignificant. And to somehow not just be a moment of awareness, but a moment that, itself, see if you can pause or open or allow yourself to simultaneously almost feel the influence of that, so that the raindrop gets absorbed into the soil, so the soil can become saturated.

And when it's saturated, then the raindrops can start making little puddles, and the puddles can grow and become little streamlets. And I'm very fond of a way of paraphrasing the Buddha's fundamental basic teaching of mindfulness, which is to know your breathing, where knowing, the cognitive movement of recognizing, knowing, which is somewhat of a mental act, is done in a relaxed way, in a natural way, without force and without needing it to accomplish anything, but to know with that receptivity, being available for any good influence it might have on you, however teeny and tiny it might be, that influence, even if the only good influence is the fact that you are available. You are open for an influence. Don't worry about not seeing it. Just being available is enough.

So we talked about knowing the breathing. And in a sense, the breathing is an exercise for beginning to discover how to know, how to recognize something peacefully, calmly, clearly. And we're learning to do that with breathing.

And it doesn't really matter if your breathing is difficult or controlled or sweet and natural or whatever. For this exercise of learning how to know, it doesn't actually matter what you're choosing for this exercise, but there are benefits with doing it with the breathing if you can. And think of it as an exercise in learning how to know clearly, but also calmly, to know clearly and easefully, properly, getting close to the natural way in which the mind knows all the time. Sometimes the mind knows silently, silent knowing.

So the first instructions that the Buddha gives is knowing the breathing. The second is to, as you're breathing, to know, to feel the body. In *Pāli*, he uses a kind of richer word than feeling. This kind of means, all the pieces of the word, a big compound word, put together, it's like experiencing for yourself what's happening within the self. Everything you feel is happening in you, with you, experiencing what's happening physically with yourself.

And there too, it's an exercise to learn how to feel peacefully, calmly, willingly. And there too, to kind of be available for the influence, the good influence, that a moment of feeling the body, feeling the breathing, feeling sensations can be. But don't be too caught up in the feeling in you. As I said, it might also be the way you're available to let feeling the way you feel have a good effect on the mind, on the body, the heart.

Don't think you can do it automatically. See if you can enjoy the exercise of discovering how to do that, to trust the body, to trust with the body, with the sensations that arise in the body. The way the Buddha described it was, as you're breathing, to feel the whole body, which is just one of the options for feeling the body.

And then the third step he offered in this triad of basic practices is to relax. The usual translation of the sophisticated word in *Pāli*, a more sophisticated word in English, is to tranquilize. But that has other associations. So, to calm, to relax, to make tranquil.

With knowing, we're just not changing anything. We're just knowing that one drop of knowing, happy for the drop. Maybe the rain is coming, where there's more continuity of moments of knowing. With feeling and sensing, we're not trying to change anything, but with relaxing, calming, we are. We are using our agency, our capacity to change, but learning to do so in a relaxed way, calmly, calming the body, peacefully, without expectation, without needing to be successful. Calming the body as you breathe.

For myself, I sometimes translate it to softening the body. Sometimes there's tension that I carry in my body that doesn't relax. It doesn't soften. And the practice then is to soften around it.

And the final thing I'll say now is, if you relax and just settle in to this moment, this time and place, and before you try to practice, you make yourself available to practice. You make yourself open, available to be changed, available to be influenced by the goodness of the practice. And letting that goodness of yourself be found in you, in each act of knowing, breathing, each drop. Letting your goodness be there with each act of feeling the body, on a path to trust the body in a deep way.

If you get pulled into a world of thinking, the soil begins to dry out. The rain of knowing, feeling, relaxing no longer has a chance to be absorbed. In fact, it begins to dry out. It might be possible to feel and sense the way that thinking, discursive thinking, being lost in thoughts, is drying, is hindering the moist influence of knowing and feeling.

When you remember to know the present moment, when you remember to feel the present moment, when you remember to be here, take one moment at a time, one drop. Maybe other drops will follow. If they do, appreciate those. Then open yourself to the influence. Open yourself to the influence of how they can condition you, recondition you, with the simplest form of knowing, experimenting with your knowing, having a sense of goodness in it, care, gentle, no expectation, just this.

All kinds of challenges will come along. How simply can you know the challenge? The gift of

knowing, sometimes a silent knowing, sometimes a verbal knowing, maybe with one word. That's simple. Sometimes maybe, for people who visualize more than thinking words, there might be a simple image to experiment with, holding the challenge, any challenge of practice, with a drop of knowing, a simple drop of feeling, what it's like in the body to not just a particular difficulty, but the influence that spreads from it, or the influence that your reaction spreads.

And can you find the experiment with a wholesome knowing of challenges that has a wholesome, beneficial influence on your heart, on your body, your mind, or at least doesn't contribute to an unwholesome influence. So because this is an experienced students retreat, I'll give advanced instruction. And the most advanced instructions is to do the basic instructions simply. That's what makes it advanced.

Take the most basic thing you know about practice of mindfulness, and do it as simply as you can. Let it just be a single drop that you allow to be absorbed. You give it a chance to have its good influence on you, even if it's only an instant of influence, even if it's fleeting on this first day, especially today. The most advanced instructions is the most important. Stay simple. Simplicity of being one drop at a time.