I am comfortable on my meditation cushion, wrapped in the silent darkness and shining constellations of winter Solstice.

Many wise teachers have shared their contemplative practices with me, but there is one practice I come back to more than the others: listening to the heart. No one taught me this, however; I discovered it myself, which is like saying I discovered that I am breathing. So many spiritual insights are like this, yet we think illumination somehow lies outside the fabric of our own being.

I am listening to the pulsation of my heart. Join me…it is easy and very profound. My right thumb is resting on the radial artery of my left wrist, where the pulse rises and falls.

The artery undulates as the waves of nutrient fluid pass through it. If we listen attentively, the wandering mind will gradually become calm and steady, and in this flowing together of heart and awareness there are many revelations waiting to be known.

Notice the qualities of the pulse. These are described in various ways by different cultures, in language reflecting the worldview of each, some poetic, some scientific. Is it slippery or tight, thread-like or bowstring, moving like a swan or like a frog? This is the aspect of the heartbeat that I learned in my studies of Chinese, Ayurvedic and Tibetan medicine. Over the years I listened to tens of thousands of people’s pulses; there were times when they spoke clearly and my diagnosis of the patient’s condition was surprisingly accurate, and there were times when all but the most basic information was veiled in mystery.

We could stop at this level and still gain great benefits of self-knowledge, as simply checking the pulse regularly will enhance our understanding of what is happening inside the body in response to the beneficial or stressful influences in our lives. What are the qualities of the pulse in the morning when we wake, after a heavy meal, after drinking alcohol, when we cannot sleep, after a long plane flight, after exercise?

By placing an attentive finger on the pulse we are gazing not only into the body, but also into the mirror of our mind. What are the qualities of the pulse when the mind is tranquil, when it is upset, when it is agitated or during meditation? Listen closely: every heartbeat is affected in a unique way with each passing thought.

Listening to the heart in this way teaches us to perceive what the body knows and feels, to hear the voice of the inner physician who is offering clues of how to balance and
regulate the ongoing rhythms of our physiological cycles, and how to live in harmony with ourselves.

But this snake-like movement is not just arterial: it is the flow of time itself. With each heartbeat the body is one moment older, a hundred thousand of those moments arising and disappearing every day, the accumulated years passing as uncountable ripples of warm fluid swirl outward from our core to dissipate upon the shores of memory.

And this we know for sure, yet cannot fully comprehend: that the movement of the blood travels into the future, and somewhere ahead lies the moment it stops. And with that cessation time also stops and the body travels forward no longer, but returns back to the elements that it arose from, as that which has carried the mind on its journey through incarnate life loosens its grip and the abyss of mystery beckons. Can you feel that moment approaching as the pulse moves steadily forward?

This is not an exercise in morbid preoccupation; the ceasing of the heartbeat will happen to all of us, whether unimaginably rich or inconceivably destitute, whether we have brought good to the world or pain. It is instead a way of bringing the mind face to face with inescapable truth, thereby dispelling the shadows of bondage and suffering cast by its self-clinging illusions.

“A holy person has no fear of death,” the Dharma Master Hsin Tao once told me. It is wise, therefore, to consider that immanent moment, and observe with honesty our feelings and reactions to our certain impermanence, until we gradually develop imperturbable transcendent equanimity, for that is the measure of how closely we dwell to the realm of reality, and therefore a genuine measure of our spiritual progress.

I sit, listening to this truth. It is there for all of us to reflect on, at any time and in any place. It is good to remember this.

But there is far more to discover in the pulse, and even contemplating impermanence becomes tiresome. Naturally, our inquisitive attention will wander. “From where does this stream arise?” it will wonder.

Listen: within each pulse, there is an echo of the one before, for each arises on the fading wave made by the previous. Can you hear them, these layers of echoes receding back from where we have come? Is our middle age not still alive as we swim down the current, and then adolescence, then childhood, infancy and birth, all moving in this river of blood, until we come to where the sound of our heartbeat mingles with that of our mother’s, pulsating in the depths of the embryonic ocean?

Is it not a miracle that this memory lives on within us? Is it not even more miraculous that this memory is accessible to our conscious mind, and requires nothing more than the
reverent offering of sustained attention to receive the priceless blessing of knowing where we came from? Humanity could be healed of its conflicts and the world cleansed of our poisonous defilements if we could simply remember the womb of our common ancestry.

There is more, listen. It is something remarkable, that we may have never considered: the moment when the sound of our own heart is no longer there in the past, just as it is no longer there in the future. Can you find that moment of silence, just before the first tiny beat of our new heart emerged from the background of waves within the matrix of the womb?

Within that instant lie the greatest of mysteries. Was that first heartbeat the arising of our first existence, or did it follow the last heartbeat of a previous one? If it was following a previous life was it instantaneous, or after a long sleep? Why did it appear in the embrace of the parents and the womb that it did, out of all the embraces and wombs available in the world? Why did it appear in a human mother, and not another creature? Why in this unique time and place in human and planetary history? What meaning and purpose and merits good and bad and debts owed and repayment of debts to be received and unfinished dreams and desires and beginnings and endings were carried within the seed that first sprouted as our newly formed heart? Surely, the answers to these questions can also be found, like pearls hidden in the depths waiting to be brought to light, by those who sincerely wish to know them.

And now time speeds up as the ear of inner listening penetrates further into the cave of our origin, following the stream of circulation into its deeper currents. Can you hear them, the conjoined heartbeats of our parents? Inside those pulsations are the heartbeats of their parents, and parents within parents until we are carried away by the great rivers of family lineages that flow together into the immense ancestral ocean of humanity.

Can you feel all those hearts beating? They are there inside us, as surely as the beating of our own heart that has come from them, and none of our myriad outward differences can alter that underlying truth of who we are really are.

Is it far-fetched to imagine that the essence of our ancestors remains within us? This would not be an alien concept to most cultures; indeed, our modern lack of such sentiments would probably be viewed by those cultures as profoundly disrespectful, if not barbarically naive.

In Taoist medicine we find that one of the descriptions of our life force includes our "ancestral chi," and that one of the images of chi is the vapor that rises from the warmth of the blood. How interesting then, that Mayan shamans would retire to fast and pray in deep caves, and in a moment of ecstasy sprinkle drops of their blood on coals in sacred altars, and see within the rising wisps of smoke the spirits of their ancestors taking form, and hear them speaking wisdom that only those gone beyond could possess.
I heard something similar but different from Tibetan doctors in the Himalayas, who claimed that once, when physicians were more spiritually developed, a sick person did not need to travel to receive a pulse diagnosis, but a close relative would suffice, so deep and intimate is the entwining of our energies.

Knowing that our ancestors live on inside us can illuminate many mysteries of karma, both individual and familial, and it is not difficult to see blessings and curses passing through the generations. We need not feel envious of those families of extreme but illbegotten wealth, for it is accompanied with much spiritual sickness; it is enough to know that whatever seeds of goodness we plant in this lifetime will not only bear fruit for ourselves but also for our descendants, and there is always the possibility that a descendant may actually be our future self.

Sometimes, when I listen to my heart in this way, I cannot help but wonder if simply hearing the whispers of the ancestral heartbeats within my own must in some way be pleasing to my mother, and the grandparents I knew who have travelled on, and even those who left before my arrival. Would we not want to be remembered? Sometimes, when I listen to my heart in this way, I sense that they do indeed perceive me thinking of them, and I cannot help but wonder if there could be a great healing for all of us in the simple inward honoring of their remembrance.

Listen more. This is not the end of the journey, for we are far more than merely human. Can you feel the worlds we came from, in the rising and falling waves of the pulse? They are there, just more subtle. There is the slow heartbeat of the botanical realm, as it stretches in adoration of the sun and bends in reverence to the moon, flowers opening and closing in their own heart-like way. There are the rapid heartbeats of creatures living only for days, the slow heartbeats of those that barely stir for months, and everything between. Beneath and within these are yet more pulsations, of the earth itself, its tides and tectonic movements and flowing lava. Can you hear the stars, singing the oldest songs in the universe, echoing as the heart beats in time to their celestial rhythms?

All this is within, and there is no ignorance so deep or arrogance so vast that will ever separate us from this existential truth, or from each other, as we wander through this infinity of appearances.

Should you doubt this, lay the finger on the pulse once again. Do you notice that it is different before and after a meal? It is, as any skilled physician would know. It is that way with drink as well, and activity, and the movement of the breath. Herein lie the presence of earth, and water, and fire and air, the outer elements of the environment as they course through the conduits of the body's inner space.

This simple method will dispel all ignorance of our constant and inseparable biological
unity with all living things, and the horrible pain our lack of awareness causes. Our unity with others is an irrefutable scientific fact that repeats itself over and over in every pulse, as if trying to gain our attention. It is in the fullness that reveals the food in the belly that came from the soil; the viscosity that reveals each cup of tea that came from the rain; the speed and warmth that reveals the rate the body is metabolizing sunlight; the smoothness or roughness that indicates the health of the lungs as they breathe together with the plants.

And there is also this, waiting for us to feel: just as those elements are flowing through us in this moment, so they are coursing through others at this time, those near and far, loved and hated, known and unknown. And not just human either, but every kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus and species, and in some way, they too know of us and our thoughts and feelings just as we somehow know of them.

The heart knows the truth about what is happening in the world, because it feels the world passing across its sensitive inner surface. Is the health of the earth’s soil increasing or declining? The heart can taste the vitality and toxicity of every meal that passes through us, as the nutrients flowing in the blood. Is the health of the earth’s water increasing or declining? The heart can sense its sweetness and its poisons with every drink that passes through us, as the liquid portion flowing in the blood. Is the health of the sunlight in the sky increasing or declining? The heart can perceive every ray that passes through us, as the solar warmth flowing in the blood. Is the health of the earth’s atmosphere increasing or declining? The heart can taste the purity and contamination of every breath that passes through us, as the oxygen flowing through the blood.

The heart knows the truth about what is happening in the world, because it feels the elements moving through it, but also the influence of our minds on those elements, for it knows when people love the soil and cause it to become fertile and when they abuse it and bring sterility, and it knows when people pray in gratitude for clean water and when they pollute it.

The heart knows that we are all made of the same elements; it is only our socially indoctrinated, and therefore confused, minds that continue seeking safety in weapons and identity in imaginary racial and ethnic superiority and righteousness in violent religious convictions, as the earth dies around us from this ancient disease.

There is no doubt that something profound animates the body. It is an intelligence that is so deep it formed our body, grew our organs, developed our brain and nerves, shaped our muscles and joints, created the miraculous sense organs, pushed us into this world and continues in every moment to coordinate quadrillions of complex microscopic events without our needing to think about any of it. In the center of this living mandala, a phenomena of unfathomable complexity, beats our heart, over which we have almost no control. Is this not the most immediate manifestation and easily perceived presence of a
life-giving power that we could possibly find? As Rumi tells us: “It is closer to you than you are to yourself.”

It is a testament to the degree to which our consciousness is veiled, and the challenge that we face to evolve beyond this collective bewilderment, that our minds are distracted, day and night, by those things which are merely empty reflections in comparison to the immediacy of the life-giving presence that pulsates within our heart. How is it that we can continually ignore that which has given us our life, that which sustains our life, and that which will end our life when it departs? This mystery of human nature is perhaps more mysterious than the mystery of Creation itself.

So, I thank you, for spending a little time remembering that presence, and feeling its movement as it courses through our arteries and veins. Perhaps if we spent more time remembering our hearts, and listening to what they are doing and what they have to tell us, we would have a more heart-centered culture.

For me, one of the easiest ways to remember the heart is not only to sit quietly listening to the pulse, as we have been doing, but to see its effects in every sense organ, to feel it in every sensation. Consider this: our eyes cannot see unless the heart pumps blood to them; the ears cannot hear unless they receive the nourishment of the heart; the tongue cannot taste and the nose cannot smell, unless the heart has supplied them with life-giving nutrients; the skin cannot feel without the beating of the heart.

And this is why traditional doctors and mystics described the sense organs as flowers, for they are rooted in the nutrient flow rising from the heart, opening like lotuses every morning when we wake. Contemplating this requires no cushion, no gong, no tortuous self discipline, for it is persistently present within our consciousness at every moment: everything we see, and hear, and taste and smell and feel, are all the outward manifestations of our beating heart. The world appears to our consciousness one heartbeat at a time, and when the heart stops, the flowers of the outer senses close, and the world disappears.

Will it appear again, rising once more as a tiny new heartbeat singing in the depths of a new womb? We do not know. All we know is that in this moment, that mysterious presence is expressing itself once again, with every pulsation of the heart.