The Energy in the Body

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When Chan-li talks about the breath, he’s talking simply about sensations of energy in the body. His instructions are meant to give you some ideas about how to understand the energy flow, or the levels of energy in the body. He wrote Method One based on his experiences in India. He noticed the yogis over there doing all kinds of extreme practices, and he posed the question in his mind, “How did they do that? How did they find the strength to stay out under the sun or to stand up on one leg for such a long period of time?” The answer that came in his meditation was that they play with the breath energy. And so he tried that, playing with the breath in various ways. He came back to Thailand and wrote Method One. A few years later, he went up into the forest and spent the rains retreat way up in the hill tribes outside of Chiang Mai. Soon after he arrived at the beginning of the rains retreat, he had a heart attack. No medicine, no doctors. If he was going to get out of there, he was going to have to walk out. There was no other way. Nobody could drive a car or a truck in or anything to get him. So he spent the rains retreat just putting himself back together physically, using the breath energy again. A monk who was with him at the time said it was fairly early in the rains retreat that Ajahn Lee came up with Method Two as a way of curing the body, healing the body. Then, at the end of the rains retreat, he was able to walk out. He got down to Bangkok and composed Method Two. And then, as he taught Method Two for a while, he got into teaching jhana. So he added this section on jhana. And you look at his dharma talks for the remainder of his life. He was constantly experimenting with different ways of understanding the breath or playing with the breath energy. He talked about the breath energy coming up the spine, the breath energy coming up the front of the body, the in-and-out breath, the subtle breath, which are the breath sensations or the energy sensations that flow through the nerves and flow out through the blood vessels out to every pore of your skin, and then the profound breath, which is just a still breath. He offered all these various ways of thinking of the breath as alternatives, different ways that you can try out. And you get the feeling that he himself continued experimenting. So as you’re following his method, on the one hand, you want to try his general principles. And John Foon noticed, after many years of teaching breath meditation, that if any student was having a problem with the breath meditation, it was usually because one of those seven steps or one of those seven elements of breath meditation at the beginning of Method Two was missing. So try to keep those different principles in mind—the length of the breath, the spot in the body where you’re focused, the importance of getting the breath to be comfortable and then spreading those comfortable breath sensations throughout the body. It feels like the whole body is breathing in unison, and your awareness can spread to fill the whole body as well. Those are the important principles. Once you’ve got the principles down, then you can start playing with them. Which way of conceiving the way the in-breath comes into the body, do you find most congenial? What gives the best results? Try a few of the recommendations that John Lee gives, and then if they don’t seem to work for you, try a few of your own. There are lots of different ways you can conceive the breath energy in the body. You can think of the breath as kind of a flow that comes in specific spots in the body when you breathe in, and then it just diffuses out through all your pores as you breathe out. You can conceive of a still breath energy. John Foong would talk of a column of energy that’s right in the center of the body, or down the center of the front of the torso. That stays still while the breath energy comes in from all directions to that spot and then goes out from that spot to all directions. There’s a lot to play with, a lot to experiment with. And this is important because the play and the experimenting, those are basic principles in developing discernment. Nobody ever gained wisdom simply by following a set of directions or a set of instructions. You follow the instructions, but then you have to learn what works for you, what doesn’t work for you, and how to develop your own powers of judgment. Without that, wisdom is never really genuine. There are methods where you have an experience and the teacher will say, “Ah, yes, that’s x or that’s y.” And you’ve got to trust the teacher. You’re not being taught to trust your own perceptions of things. That’s dangerous and it’s limiting. What you want to do is learn how to read your experience and get a sense of what’s skillful and what’s not, because this is the basis for the Four Noble Truths. Skillful action, undesirable result. Unskillful action, undesirable result. Those are the basic parameters of the Four Truths. And you have to develop your sensitivity as to what really is desirable and what’s not, what’s skillful and what’s not. You’ve got to learn how to see cause and effect as they happen in yourself. And the only way you can do that is by experimenting with the causes and see what different results come out. So here you are, right at the breath. You’ve got all the things you need for insight. You’ve got the body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities. They’re all right here. The different forms of fabrication are all right here. There’s the bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breathing, verbal fabrication, thought and evaluation, which are directing your thoughts to the breath and evaluating the breath as it comes in and out. And mental fabrication, feelings and perceptions, feelings of comfort, discomfort, and your perception of how those relate to the breath. These are all the raw materials for insight. See, you’re right here where they’re all present. It’s simply a matter of getting in, learning how to read what’s happening. The instructions that Ajaan Lee gives are suggestions for exploration. You try them out, experiment with them, and over time you learn how to evaluate the results of what you’re getting. And the wisdom becomes your own. The discernment becomes your own. That’s when it can really do important work in the mind. Because as you get greater and greater sensitivity in reading the breath, you also become more and more capable of reading the mind, what the mind is doing, the results of what it’s doing. You see the events in the mind in terms of cause and effect. This is how the insight you develop becomes really liberating, because you can see the events in the mind and realize the things that you used to ride with, the things that you used to identify with as yourself, for your own. You don’t want to or you don’t need to ride with them anymore. Instead of looking at them in terms of “me” or “mine,” you look at them in terms of cause and effect. Part of it calls a chain that you have more mastery over. That’s because you can see the ways in which your own intentions cause stress. That starts making you look at your intentions in a new way. Any event in the mind that you’ve been identifying with, you learn to look at it in a new way. And when you can look at it in a new way, that’s when you learn how to gain release from it. So this ability to evaluate your breath is developing an important capacity in the mind, an important ability, an important sensitivity that you can’t develop simply by following steps one, two, three, four, and reporting to the teacher and the teacher pats you on the head. We’re not meditating to get pats on the head. We’re meditating to overcome our addiction to creating suffering. That’s purely an internal matter. And it can be done only by developing your own internal ability to see what’s happening and to evaluate what’s happening. So use the meditation as an opportunity to explore. To see what works. And if things don’t work, to be more creative and more imaginative in your ways of trying out alternatives. Until you find something that really is peaceful for the mind, something that really is absorbing, something that really does give you insights into what’s going on. Because it’s that kind of sensitivity that leads to release. You get beyond cause and effect by learning how to master cause and effect. And you start with simple things like this, learning to be really observant of this physical element, this physical property, the property of energy. And that’s the closest thing in the body to your mind.

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