Energy Channels

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There’s a book called Coming Into the Country by John McPhee. It’s a long section devoted to people who go out and live in the wilderness in Alaska. One of the big questions, of course, is how do you survive? What kind of people survive? What kind of people don’t make it? One of the common threads is that people who survive are the ones who are very pragmatic. They don’t have a lot of preconceived notions about how a particular problem will have to be solved. Sometimes they use traditional means, sometimes they use modern means. They’re not tied down to any ideology about having to turn themselves into pure Indians or whatever. They take what works. They learn to be strategic. As you’re dealing with the wilderness of your mind, it’s good to take some of these lessons to heart. We all have to be strategic in our meditation, which requires patience and a willingness to watch, to see what works and what doesn’t work. So it means that sometimes to see what works and doesn’t work is going to take time. You can’t just move in and force things, especially against the way they naturally seem to want to go. If they’re naturally going in the wrong direction, it’s not the case that you try to turn them around, but you try to divert them gradually around, around, around, and then you get them back to where you want them. A good case in point is the instruction on being aware of the whole body as you breathe in and as you breathe out. We all find as we get into the body that the parts of the body you don’t sense seem to have disappeared. Or there are energy flows that go too strongly in one direction. Hakuin in his writings talks about zen sickness, which is an energy that flows up to the head and gets stuck there, is not willing to come down. If you try to fight that energy back, you end up exhausted. So it’s not so much a case of pushing it in an opposite direction. It’s learning to realize that there are channels that it can also go down. That’s what happens when the channels are closed. They might be in your neck, they might be in your shoulders, in your chest. So instead of trying to push the energy in your head back down, you look into the body to see where the potential downward openings are closed, and then you sit by them and try to keep them as open as much as you can. It may take a while for the energy to start coming back down, but you’ve got to be strategic in this way. Otherwise, it’s like getting out in the middle of a freeway and telling all the cars to turn back. What happens? You get run over. But if you figure out a way to route them through the neighborhood, you can get them back going down. If they’re coming up north, you get them to go back to southbound lanes. It can be done. So as you’re working with the energy in the body, realize that you’ve got to be strategic, you’ve got to be patient, and you can’t just force things. You don’t use physical force. You use the power of alertness, being alert to where the blockages are and then just thinking, “Open, open, open.” It may take a while before you can find the strategic openings, but they’re there. The same holds true if you’ve found that you’ve got a part of the body missing. You can’t force the breath in there, but there are places where it’s blocked. If, for instance, the shoulder is missing, and you try to survey your body, it seems that your right shoulder is not there. Ask yourself, “Can you feel your right elbow? Can you feel the neck on the right side?” And then what connection do you feel between them? Maybe your mental map has gotten out of kilter and your shoulder is dislocated, either way back or way up or way down or way forward. Not where you might expect it to be. But there is going to be some place where you can sense the shoulder. It’s just that your mental map is all skewed up. Again, you can’t just force it back into line. Just ask yourself, “Okay, where are the blockages here? Are they in the chest? Are they in the back and the flank? Can you sense any blockage there? Can you feel the places where it’s closed down and tight?” And again, instead of forcing it, you just sit there and think, “Open, open, open,” and just try to keep that sense of openness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Because many times you’ll find that in order to emphasize the difference between the in-breath and the out-breath, you tend to squeeze. Different parts of the breath body, different channels of the breath energy, at some point in the breathing cycle. So try to be sensitive to that. When you find a place where you’ve been squeezing it, think all the way in, all the way out, and all the way through the spots between the in and out breaths. “Open, open, open.” That’s all you have to think. You don’t have to push any pressure on it. Just think, “Open.” And if you hit the right spot, you’ll begin to sense that the energy is now flowing where it didn’t flow before. You don’t have to direct it so much as simply provide it with some new channels. This requires patience and it requires precision. But it also means that you don’t have to fight so much in the meditation. You don’t have to push things into a particular mold. That way, you learn a lot of interesting lessons. You think about the Buddha. As he was looking for awakening, he had many ways he tried to push his way into nirvana, and they didn’t work. He was going to stop his breathing. He was going to go without food. He tried it for six years and it didn’t work. Nirvana is not the sort of thing that you can storm, the way you would storm a castle. You have to be more indirect about it. Instead of saying, “Okay, I’m not going to do anything at all. I’m just going to open my mind up like the sky and not have any intentional actions.” Well, what happens, of course, is the factor of attention goes out of ground. You want to get to the unfabricated, but you have to use fabrication. That’s a very clever strategy, and it’s the only one that works. Many of us like to think all we have to do is just let go, let go, let go, and there we are, let goed. But it doesn’t work that way. You focus on developing certain qualities of mind. You develop your concentration. You develop your mindfulness. And as you focus on doing these things more skillfully, it just so happens that you find something valuable. It may not have been precisely where you thought it would be. It may not have been precisely what you thought it would have been, but you find it. That’s the important thing. In the course of being very meticulous, very precise, very sensitive to what you’re doing, as you try to bring the mind to stillness, notice places where there’s still stress that you’re causing. Learn new strategies so that you don’t have to cause that stress and still keep the mind at ease and keep it focused. It’s in the course of this that you discover the important things that you’re looking for. This is one way you can think about it. The development of the path is the realization of nirvana. In other words, it’s in the process of developing the path that you uncover the deathless. You can’t just will yourself into nirvana. As Ajahn Fuhrman once said, “If we could get to nirvana simply through the force of desire, we all would have gotten there a long time ago.” We have to be more strategic, a little bit more indirect. Just as if you were dealing with a wild animal, you don’t go straight at the animal. You look someplace else. It’s funny how animals tend to know when you’re staring at them, and it scares them. But many times, if you want to observe them, you look off in another direction. They think you’re not looking at them. You watch them out of the corner of the eye, and you get to see what they’re doing. It’s the same with some of the important things in the meditation. You don’t go barreling right at them. Our goal is the deathless, but you can’t just go charging right at it. You have to work first at the path, fostering the qualities of the path in the mind and in the body. This is something we bring both body and mind to. As you get a more intuitive sense within the body of what works and what doesn’t work, then it’s easier to remember. It becomes part of your somatic memory. If the lessons or insights you’ve learned from the meditation are simply mental jottings, it’s very easy for them to get erased. Other events come up in your life and they blot them out. But if you learn how to relate to your breath with goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, equanimity, and you begin to embody those qualities in the way you relate to your own energy body, you can begin to embody them to the rest of yourself and to other people as well. You get practice in being strategic with your own breath, and you can start being more strategic in the way you relate to other people. If not in a bad way, but in a good way. So there are a lot of lessons to be learned in the way you relate to the breath and the body, the different levels of breath energy. You learn lessons in patience, lessons in cause and effect. You see what works and what doesn’t. Then these lessons can spill over into the rest of your life as well. You carry them with you. Because this most immediate relationship between the mind and the body as they meet at the breath, as that gets straightened out and as you get more sensitive to what works and what doesn’t work there, you can embody those lessons in the rest of your life as well.

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