Bodywork for the Mind

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In his later years, Ajaan Foon rarely accepted invitations to houses for meals. But there was one time when one of his students invited to her house, saying that she didn’t want him to chant, she just wanted to have a Dhamma discussion. She had some of her friends come over, so before the meal we had a Dhamma discussion. One of her friends had been studying meditation with another teacher who basically had told her, “All you have to do is just sit here and empty your mind.” That’s what meditation is all about. Ajaan Foon was quite emphatic that, “No, that’s not the case.” She said, “If you empty your mind, it’s like opening the door to your house and just leaving it there. Anything can walk in. This doesn’t have to be spirits outside. It can just be any thought that comes into your mind. It’s just going to move right in. There’s nothing to move it out.” As the Buddha said, one of the functions of mindfulness is to notice what’s skillful and what’s not. If something is skillful, you try to encourage it to arise and encourage it not to pass away. And if it’s unskillful, you try to discourage it from arising and try to hasten its passing away. So you’re not just sitting here watching people coming in and out of the house. You’re like the gatekeeper at the fortress. Some people you allow in and other people you don’t. The best thing to do to make sure that something skillful comes in is to make up your mind you’re going to do something skillful. Give yourself a concentration topic that you like. It could be the breath, it could be butto, it could be contemplating the parts of the body. There are lots of different subjects that different people will find get their minds to settle down. There’s no one meditation topic for everyone. The Buddha taught a whole range of concentration topics. And you notice in the forest tradition there’s no one forest tradition technique. There are lots of techniques, because different people have different needs. So figure out right now what’s going to work. And if you can’t figure it out, well, try something. Try the breath. See what kind of breathing gets you interested, what kind of breathing feels good for the body, feels good for the mind. If the breath doesn’t feel all that satisfying, well, ask yourself what kind of breathing would feel satisfying. If you don’t like the breath coming in and out of the nose, you can try the breath energy coming in and out of different parts of the body. You can visualize it, imagine it. And it’s strange how the imagination works in that way. If the mind allows something to happen, it’ll happen. In other words, the breath possibility is already there. It’s just that we tend to program ourselves to miss things. It’s like those computers who were reading the readouts for the satellites over the South Pole. For years, the satellites kept on sending back data, saying there’s a big ozone hole. And the computers’ programs were designed so that that kind of data would be rejected, because it was impossible. Finally, they began to realize that the message was pretty insistent. So sometimes it requires reprogramming your mind a little bit to think of the breath not as air coming in and out of the lungs, but as a movement of energy. Then you can ask yourself where in the body would feel good for that energy to come in. And John Lee talks about it coming in at the back of the neck, at the base of the skull. And for people who have heart problems, that’s a good place to think of it coming in. But if you don’t have a heart problem, maybe you have another kind of problem. This is one of the things I particularly find interesting about the breath technique, is that it’s good for lots of different ailments in the body. There are ways of breathing that are good when you’re tired. There are ways of breathing that are good when you’re feeling wired. There are ways of breathing that are good when you’ve got stomach problems. Experiment to see what you need right now and try to make this your default mode, i.e., you’re going to be with the breath. You’re going to be centered right here at the spot where the mind and the body meet at the breath. It may not be your normal default mode, but it’s a good normalcy to develop. It’s like going to a chiropractor or a rolfer. They’re going to work on your body. You come out after a couple of sessions and your body feels all weird. It’s like it’s put together in a new way. What they’ve done is they’ve actually put it into alignment. Because you’ve been out of alignment for so long, it feels strange. And it’s so easy to slip back to your old posture. Which is why you have to have little exercises throughout the day to try to realign yourself, to get used to the new alignment. This feels good. It’s the same with the Middle Way. The Middle Way is not just halfway between making an effort and not making an effort. It’s trying to figure out what effort is appropriate right now. And it’s not a middling feeling tone between pleasure and pain. After all, look at the descriptions of right concentration, there’s rapture, feeling, and the whole body. In Buddha comparison to water, you mix in with flour to make dough, and it saturates the whole ball of dough. And as it gets deeper in, then the water turns into the water of a lake with a spring welling up inside. And again, you allow that sense of pleasure and rapture to fill the whole body. So we’re not talking about a middling pleasure. It’s pretty intense. The same with pain. Sometimes you have to work with pain, which can either be working with a painful meditation topic. If lust is a real problem, it’s good to work on the contemplation of the body, which is not a pleasant topic to contemplate, but it’s something that’s necessary at times. So work on it when it’s needed. And the Buddha also recommends learning how to sit with pain and learn how to endure it. How the mind reacts to pain. After all, that’s the first noble truth. There’s pain and suffering. Dukkha can mean pain, it can mean suffering, it can mean stress. You’re going to want to be able to study this. So you get the mind at a good concentration so you give yourself a good foundation, a good place to stand so you can look at pain when it arises and not run away. In other words, to find the right middle, you have to push yourself sometimes. And learn how to read the results in the body and the mind to see what’s necessary, whether you should let up a little bit or push even harder. The Buddha says the point of just right sometimes depends on the issue and sometimes depends on your strength. You probably know the image of the lute. There was a monk who was meditating. He’d been very delicately brought up, so delicate that he had hair on the soles of his feet. He ordained and started doing walking meditation, and his feet got all bloody and he began to get discouraged. He was thinking, “Well, maybe I’ll just go back, disrobe, and make merit.” And the Buddha appeared right in front of him. He said, “Are you thinking of disrobing?” And the monk said, “Yes.” Then the Buddha gave the image of the lute that was tuned. When the strings were too tight, it didn’t sound right. When the strings were too loose, it didn’t sound right. If you had the strings tuned just right, then the lute would sound fine. In the same way, the Buddha said, “Take your level of energy as your guide, and then tune the rest of your faculties, i.e., conviction, mindfulness, concentration, and assertion, to your level of energy.” Apparently, lutes in those days had five strings, so it’s the same way you tune a guitar. You tune one string, and then you tune the remaining strings to that one. So that’s one way to gauge what’s just right. In other words, what you’re capable of, what you’re capable of maintaining. Sometimes “just right” has to do with the problem that comes up, as the Buddha said, with some causes of suffering. All you have to do is just sit and watch them, and they go away. Step back from them a little bit, look at them straight on. Those are the ones that are able to have some power over the mind because you’re not really looking at them directly. They’re coming in from the corner of your eye, or whispering behind your ear. They seem to be bigger than they actually are, and you give in to them. But when you actually stop and look, what’s that impulse going here? Simply the fact that you step back from them is enough for them to go away. It doesn’t require much effort at all. Other problems in the mind, though. The Buddha says you have to fabricate an exertion, or exert a fabrication. He uses both phrases. The fabrication here has to do with bodily fabrication, in other words, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you talk to yourself about the issue; or mental fabrication, the feelings and perceptions you have around the issue. You’ve got to work with those, especially with the verbal fabrication, learning to talk to yourself. When you find yourself being inclined to give in to something, you have to be pretty strict with yourself and ask, “Why? What’s the compulsion here? What’s the allure? Why do you like this? Can’t you see the drawbacks?” Then you can analyze things a little bit further. Ask yourself, “When this particular impulse comes, how does it come? What comes along with it? Can you see when it disappears?” Sometimes the actual impulse disappears, but it’s already triggered some hormones in your system, which give the impression that the greed or the anger or the lust or whatever is still there, even though the mind has dropped the topic. But the manifestations in the body are still there because you’ve still got those hormones in your bloodstream. Learn how to read the situation. Learn how to talk to yourself and say, “No, this is not a sign that that original emotion is still there. These are just the side effects, the after-effects, the after-shocks.” That way you protect yourself from believing that you have to go back in again and pick up that thought. Look for it to arise when it does arise again. Try to be very quick in noticing what came along with it. What belief does the mind have that said, “This would be a good thing to think about”? It may have not said that quite so clearly, but there’s that little bit of a message in there that says, “Go ahead, think about it.” You have to question why. What’s the allure? What’s the attraction? Then you’ll find that there’s a certain perception that goes along with that. In other words, an image you hold in your mind that’s underlying the more conscious image. There may be a whole series of slightly subconscious images going on. And if you’re quick enough, you can see them. And when you really see them, you see through them. You see that they’re not all that compelling after all. So there are times when you really do have to take things apart and push yourself to question the things that are going on in the mind. Be a little bit skeptical. So those are the cases where you have to exert more energy, put in more effort. In other words, it’s not a matter of what you feel you’re up for, it’s what’s required. Sometimes you find that the problem is more than you can handle right now. Put a post-it note on it, say, “We’re going to come back to this one,” and then give the mind a chance to rest so it can sharpen its tools and then try to come back again. Keep at it, learning how to pace yourself. This is another issue where “just right” comes in. The image that the Ajahns give is of trying to cut things with a knife. If the knife is well-sharpened, you cut with one chop and that’s it. But if you keep chopping, chopping, chopping, after a while, even the best knife gets dull and you’ve got to rest. So drop the issue. Go back. Allow the mind to settle in and have that sense of well-being that comes from settling in with your concentration topic. And don’t be in too great a hurry. Don’t be in a hurry to push it out of the concentration. Let the mind have its fill, and then when it’s ready, it’ll come out. Then you can try to come at the issue with it from a new angle. This way you begin to realize that the middle of the middle way is not middling. It’s more a sense of what’s appropriate, what’s in proportion to the issue. What amount of effort is in proportion to the issue? What amount of effort is in proportion to what you can do, what you’re capable of? And it’s in finding that point of proper proportion that your discernment develops and you learn how to run the affairs of your mind with a lot more skill. In other words, you don’t let your desire to be done with an issue push things too far. You don’t let your desire to just rest and let things go make you too lazy. You’re finding a new point of alignment, a new posture for the mind where everything is well-balanced, in the Buddhist sense of well-balanced. As Ajahn Mahaprabhu used to say, “Even the defilements have their sense of just right.” He says the middle way for them is the middle of the pillow. But they can also talk about just this amount of effort is enough, then you can rest. So we have to ask ourselves, “Who’s speaking here?” Test things a little bit. Keep coming back to that realization that we’re not here doing a programmed meditation. We’re testing things for ourselves. That’s how the Buddha found awakening. That’s how everybody has to find awakening. There’s no one technique that’s going to be guaranteed. You put your mind into the technique and turn the grinder and out comes enlightenment. You can make sausage that way, but you can’t make enlightenment that way. Or, as Ajahn Fu used to say, “Awakening can be found just through the force of our desire.” Everybody would have gone there already. It requires more finesse. This is where you develop that finesse in getting that sense of what is genuinely just right, as you give the mind the energy it needs and the concentration, and you give it the work it needs to do in order to unburden itself. Because that’s what all this work is for. To put down the burdens of the mind. So the work doesn’t end in exhaustion. It ends in freedom. The ability to stand really straight because you’re not carrying things around on your shoulders. Years back in Thailand, before they had big containers, ships were unloaded by these guys who spent their whole days just carrying loads. They were very thin, but they had very muscular legs. And because they were bent over all day long, even when they took the burdens off, they were still bent over. You don’t want your mind to be like that. You want your mind to be able to drop its burdens and stand up straight. That’s what this practice is for.

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