Sensitive to the Body, Sensitive to the Mind

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When you read Ajahn Lee’s instructions on the breath, and particularly how they developed over time, you realize that in his basic manual, keeping the breath in mind, he explains things one way. But then in his Dharma talks he explains them in other ways as well, sometimes the same way as he explained them in the book, and sometimes other ways, which shows that he was continuing to explore. In other words, he didn’t have a mechanical method that had to be applied in all circumstances. And a lot of his discernment came from playing with the breath in different ways. For instance, in the instructions in Method Two, he talks about having the breath energy go down the spine. But in another one of his Dharma talks, he talks about it starting down in the soles of the feet and going up the spine. That means he was listening to his body and continued to listen. There wasn’t a point where he stopped listening. He just forced things. This is an important object lesson in how we meditate. We take the basic instructions and we have to play with them in response to what we notice in our bodies. So we can’t just take the method and say, “I’m just going to apply this without thinking about it.” Just be very dutiful. Because you’re missing a lot in what the body’s going to say. They sometimes talk about the body’s wisdom. The body’s not wise, but the body does have its way of functioning. If the body were really wise, it would tell you what it needed up front. But it turns out that we have to watch it very carefully, consistently, and experiment with it before we can see cause and effect. It’s developing our own wisdom, the mind’s wisdom, that’s at stake here. This starts with something as very simple as the in-and-out breath. In the old texts, they talk about the breath coming in and out long, going in and out long. And John Lee expands on it. He says there are times when you actually want to have the breath come in short and out long, or sometimes you want to have it come in long and out short. Where did he learn that? From his own observation, seeing that it gave good results. That was a point that he was making. He found many, many times that it really did make a difference. If you have an idea that the in-breath has to be equally as long as the out-breath, you can sometimes force the body into some bad states. And the question is, well, if it’s coming in long and out short, where’s the extra breath going? Well, the extra breath is getting stored away in the body because the body needs it. Other times, when it’s going out long and coming in short, there’s excess someplace in terms of the energy. As for the air, who knows? That’s not the issue here. The issue is, what does your sense of the body as you feel it from within need right now? And you also have to learn how to listen to its responses to your instructions to change. Sometimes we can be pretty pushing, and it turns out that it doesn’t work that way. Some parts of the body, in order to open up, require a lot of gentleness and very consistent gentleness. It’s almost as if they don’t trust you. They’ve seen you push other parts of the body around. Maybe you push them around, and now they’ve shut up. So you have to be very careful, very patient. Just breathe around them and show them as you treat them. The breath energy in different parts of the body, that you can be gentle, you can be sensitive. This is what it comes down to when you’re trying to develop your sensitivity. This is what discernment is. Sensitivity is what’s going on inside the body, in the mind, and in the interface here at the breath. So you can begin to see patterns of cause and effect, and then learn how to use them to your advantage. That’s one of the basic issues in wisdom, is seeing what’s worth doing and what’s not worth doing. And you’re not going to see that unless you’re really sensitive to exactly what you’re doing and exactly what the results are. You can read the texts and force them on your experience, but that may not necessarily be the wisest thing to do. Because sometimes you get the wrong text or the wrong interpretation, and you apply it at the wrong time in the wrong place. So your own sensitivity and your willingness to listen to what’s actually going on, those will be the foundation of your discernment so you learn how to apply a particular teaching. Now, this may be particularly relevant to the fact that we’re coming from a Thai tradition and the Thai language has a lot more in-between the words than English does. In English, things tend to get pretty well spelled out. But reading a Thai text is like reading a telegram. So our Thai people, when they read a text, they realize they’ve got to fill in the blanks. And so when you’re reading the instructions from the Thai masters, you’ve got to fill in the blanks as well. And the same when you’re reading your own body, you’ve got to fill in the blanks. As I said, if the body were really wise, it would tell you up front. But it’s not. It just has its way of functioning. And as far as the body is concerned, it could die and encounter disease, but it doesn’t care. It’s the mind that has to care, so it’s the mind that has to learn how to be with the body and yet not create extra suffering. So it’s not the issue of the body’s wisdom. It’s the issue of how you’re going to develop the mind’s wisdom in dealing with the body so that you get the results you want. At the same time, you have to realize the body has its limitations. You can make it only so good. That’s another thing you have to learn how to read when you’re working with direct thought and evaluation, as John Foon would say. It’s like filling a jar with water. There comes a point when the jar is full. You can keep on adding water if you want to, but it’s just going to overflow. It’s not going to serve any purpose. The same with adjusting the breath. You can get things as full as possible or as healthy as possible in the breath, but it can go only so far. When you learn how to read that point of “only so far,” then you let yourself be content with what you’ve got, and then you try to settle in. In other words, you’re not standing outside adjusting the breath. You’re allowing yourself to be immersed in the breath, surrounded by the breath. The mind can put aside a lot of its thinking and just be very still. This teaches you an important lesson that the body’s not always going to be amenable to being adjusted. You may learn a lot about adjusting the breath, but there come some diseases where it makes it harder. Of course, when you’re about to die, the body’s not going to be responding to the breath the way it has in the past. There’s no way to breathe that prevents you from dying. We’re all going to die at some point. But by this point, we hope that you’ve developed enough discernment so that, having listened to the body, you’ve developed your wisdom, i.e., through your sensitivity to the body, you begin to apply that same sensitivity to your mind. Because the mind’s going to require even more sensitivity. It, too, has its ways of functioning. And here, too, we have the problem of pushing the mind around. So here again, we have to learn how to listen to it. When you try to adjust things in one way, what happens? When you try to adjust them in another way, what happens? When you’re harsh with the mind, how does it respond? When you’re gentle with the mind, how does it respond? Is it possible to be too gentle, too harsh? There are times when it is good to be harsh, and other times when it’s good to be gentle. Here again, you have to learn to develop your sensitivity, because that’s what’s going to see you through. That combined with ingenuity. When something’s not working, you have to ask yourself, “What if I flipped it around? Or is there some area that I’m totally ignoring?” You learn these lessons with the breath as you find that there are parts of the body that have been overlooked. Then you apply the same lesson to the mind. Which parts of your mind have been overlooked? How do you learn how to incorporate them in, in a skillful way? So wisdom is not a matter of memorizing certain books or certain teachings. It comes down to your own sensitivity, which is what we’re trying to develop as we meditate. It comes down to your own ingenuity, which is another quality we try to develop as we meditate. It’s possible for outside instructions to give you some pointers, but it’s up to you to learn how to develop these qualities on your own. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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