Responsible for the Body & Mind

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Someone once came to Jon Lee with a problem. His friends had found out that he was meditating. They said, “So, you’re a meditator. You tell us that the body, your feelings, perceptions, thought fabrications, and consciousness are all not self. So why can’t we hit you?” He didn’t know how to respond. Jon Lee told him to say, “Look, they’re borrowed goods. I have to take care of them before I give them back. We have this body, we have this mind. And even though ultimately they’re not totally under our control, we’re going to have to let go of them at some point. It’s true we want to get good use out of them while they are, to some extent, under our control. There are going to be a lot of things as you examine your body and examine your mind that you’re not going to like. There are pains in the body, painful thoughts in the mind. But if you don’t examine them, if you don’t take care of them, you’re never going to be able to get past them. A common image among the forested jhansas is that looking after the body, looking after the mind, is like looking after a wound. If you’re disgusted by the wound, you don’t like to look at it. You think it’s ugly, maybe smelly. And so for that reason you don’t take care of it, it’s going to get worse. You have to look after these things, get some use out of them, get some insight out of them before you let them go. Because the insight is what’s freeing. In terms of the body, this means if you have an illness, you take care of it within reason. As Ajahn Lee notices though, most of us don’t take care of it within reason. This is like seeing a watch that’s getting a little rusty. You take the whole thing apart, then you can’t put it back together again. You take care of it within reason. And whatever is beyond your control, you have to learn how to accept that. With the mind, though, you really take care of it all the way through. That’s what your priorities are. It’s the state of your mind. Because ultimately the body will have to be let go. It’s going to die. And when it gets to the point where it’s beyond your ability to take care of it, you let it go. But you will still have the mind. There’s an awareness in there that’s not the same thing as the activities of the mind. And that’s what’s going to move on. And it’s going to move on in whatever shape we’ve put it through the training. Now, there are lots of different trainings in the world. There’s training in greed. There’s training in aversion. There’s training in fear, delusion. But there’s also training in wisdom, training in insight. And the type of training you choose is going to determine what you’ve got to take with you and the shape of the mind as a result. So as it goes, that’s something you want to look after carefully. And make that your top priority. We do that by leaning on the body for the time being. We’re going to lean on the breath. You learn how to take care of the breath. It’s not just in-out-in-out. You begin to notice that there are comfortable ways of breathing and uncomfortable ways of breathing. There’s an impact on the mind and ways of breathing that have a bad impact. And so you take care of it. I had a student who went to study in Thailand. She was studying with an Ajaan who did not like Ajaan Lee’s method. So what is this? Working with the breath. Adjusting the breath. The breath is just a fabrication. You’re supposed to let it go. She reported this to me. I told her if it had been me, it didn’t really matter. I said,”Your body is just a fabrication. Why do you bathe it?” Of course, that would have ended the relationship with the Ajaan. But the path itself, the whole path, is fabricated. It’s something we put together. So we learn how to put it together well. We’re putting together a state of concentration so that the mind can watch itself with a sense of well-being. So we need to give it a good place to stay. The breath throughout the entire body is a very good way of doing that. It gets us out of our heads, back in touch with the body. And it’s also healing for the body. If the breath energy flows everywhere through the body, all the organs get to work. I have another student who’s got a problem with compromised lung capacity. She was beginning to get the problem that the oxygen level in her blood was going down. She wore a little monitor that would tell her when it’s getting dangerously low. She noticed that as she was meditating, the monitor would tend to go off. I told her, “Remember, you’re supposed to be breathing with the whole body. See if that helps.” And sure enough, as soon as she started thinking about the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, the oxygen level in the blood went up. And she was able to keep it above, outside, at the dangerous level. So it’s not just imaginary work we’re doing here. It’s a real thing. You’re breathing in a way that’s good for the body. It can’t help but have a healing impact. But most importantly, it has a healing impact on the mind. You’ve got a good place to stay. And when you’ve got a good place to stay, you can look into your mind and begin to admit some things about your committee of the mind that you’re not running very well. You can listen to in which voices you shouldn’t, which voices you can reason with, and which voices you’ve got to throw out. And when you’re doing that from a sense of well-being, a sense of belonging here, you can make sure that those voices don’t push you out of your sense of belonging here. In John Chah’s images of having a house with one large seat and you’re sitting in the seat comfortably, everybody else that comes in and goes out has to stand. Just make sure that they don’t evict you from the seat and take it over. In other words, you don’t want greed to take over the seat. You don’t want anger, jealousy, fear, clinging. You don’t want these to take over the seat. You’ve got to be in charge. Then you can watch the events of the mind. You give them so much reality, keep reminding yourself, “This is a fabrication. These perceptions I have, these are just sketches of reality.” We live so much in our perceptions, in other words, the labels we apply to things, in that they’re like little cartoon sketches. In some cases they’re very useful. They’re good enough to get us around. But in other cases the sketches are way off. They may have been accurate for some purpose, but we start applying them for others. We have to learn how to pick them up and put them down. It’s like when we have the perception that the body is ours. You use that perception as you would look after the body, but then you’ve got to put it down when the body goes out of control. Certain feelings, certain memories that are good or bad can go out of control. They’re good to hold on to for some purposes, but they’re not good to hold on to for others. This is why the Buddha taught appropriate attention, which doesn’t mean bare attention. Appropriate attention is when you notice what things are worth attending to and which ones are not. Which ones are helpful, which ones are not. And also remember how to approach suffering. In other words, you’re not trying to push it away. You’re trying to understand it. Understand it to the point where you can see what’s causing it, so you can abandon the cause. It’s like going into your house. There’s smoke in the house. You don’t try to put out the smoke. You search for the fire. But you follow the smoke to see where it’s coming from. When you find the fire, you put that out. Then the smoke is no longer a problem. This is called appropriate attention. If you see that there’s smoke in the house, you get upset and you get worked up. You just run around. The house could burn down. You’ve got to be calm enough so you can follow the smoke. That’s called appropriate attention. And as for things that have nothing to do with the way the mind is causing suffering for itself, you’re going to make those secondary. Have your priorities straight. Remember, the mind is more important than the mind itself. It will stay with you. The feelings, the perceptions, the thoughts, they’ll go. Your memories, they’ll go. But your awareness is something there, and you want the awareness to be in good shape so that as it’s processing the present moment, it doesn’t cause itself suffering. So we put together this path. Ultimately, it will take us to something that’s not put together, but something that’s really worthy of being a goal. But in the meantime, you remember, where does the path lie? It lies in training the mind. You take care of the body to whatever extent is necessary and to help in training the mind. Someday you have to let it go. Someday you have to let go of the contents of the mind. But the skills you’ve learned in how to make the mind function so that it doesn’t cause unnecessary suffering, those will go with you. So work on those. And you’ll be glad you did.

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