

Energy Channels

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In a book called *Coming into the Country*, by John McPhee, there'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 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 of 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 the willingness to watch, to see what works, what doesn't work. Patience also means that to see what works and doesn't work sometimes takes 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 can't try to turn them around, but you have to try to convert them gradually around, around, around until 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 that as we get into the body, the parts 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, gets stuck there, and isn't 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 in an opposite direction, it's learning to realize that there are channels that it can also go down. So what's happened? The channels are closed. They might be in your neck, your throat, 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. 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 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 a neighborhood, turning here, turning there, you can get them back going in the other direction. If they were coming up north, you can get them to go through the neighborhood and go back the southbound lanes. It can be done.

So as you're working with the energy in the body, realize you've got to be strategic, you've got to be patient. 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 you've got a part of the body missing. You can't force the breath in there. There are places where it's blocked. For instance, suppose the shoulder is missing. You try to survey your body and it seems that your right shoulder isn't there. Ask yourself, "Can you feel your right elbow? Can you feel the neck on the right side? Then what connection do you feel between them?" It may be that your mental map has gotten out of kilter, your shoulder is mis-located, i.e., either way back or way up, or way down or way forward, not where you might expect it to be. But there's going to be someplace where you can sense the shoulder, just that it's not where you'd expect it to be. Your mental map is all skewed.

Well again, you can't just force it back into line. Just ask yourself, where are the blockages here? Are they in the chest? Are they in the back? In the flank? Can you sense any blockage there? Can you feel the place where it's closed down and tight? Then instead of forcing it, you just sit there and think, "Open, open, open." Try to keep that sense of openness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

Often you find that in order to emphasize the difference between the in-breath and 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 you've been squeezing it, okay, think: "Open, all the way in, all the way out, all the way through the spots between the in-breath and the out-breath, open, open, open." That's all you have to think. You don't have to push any pressure on it, just think "open." If you hit the right spot, you begin to sense that the energy is now flowing where it didn't flow before. You don't have to direct it so much, just provide it with some new channels.

This requires patience and precision. But it also means you don't have to fight so much in the meditation or to push things into a particular mold. In that way, you learn a lot of interesting lessons. Think about the Buddha, as he was looking for awakening. He had tried many ways of pushing his way into nibbāna 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. Nibbāna is not the sort of thing that you can storm the way you'd storm a castle. You have to be more indirect about it. Instead of saying, "Okay, I'm not going to do anything. I'm just going to open my mind up like the sky, not having any intentional actions," what happens of course is that the factor of intention goes underground. 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 think all we have to is let go, let go, let go, and there we are: "let go'ed." But it doesn't work that way. You focus on developing certain qualities of mind. You develop your concentration; you develop mindfulness. 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 be, 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're trying to bring the mind to stillness. Notice where there are places where there's still stress that you're causing and learn new strategies so that you don't have to cause that stress and still able to keep the mind at ease and focused. It's in the course of this that you discover the important things you're looking for.

One way you can think about the development of the path is that it's the realization of nibbāna. In other words, it's in the process of developing the path that you uncover the deathless. You can't just will yourself into nibbāna. As Ajaan Fuang once said, if we could get to nibbāna simply through the force of desire, we all would've gotten there a long time ago.

We have to be more strategic, more indirect, just as when you're dealing with a wild animal. You don't go looking straight at the animal. You look someplace else. It's funny how animals tend to know when you're staring at them. It scares them. But often, if you want to observe them, you look off to the side, in another direction, and 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 are doing.

It's same with some of the important things in the meditation. You don't go barreling right at them. Your 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 you blot them out. But if you learn how to relate to your breath with goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity, and you begin to combine those qualities just right in the way you relate to your own energy body, then you can begin to embody them to the rest of yourself and to the rest of the world 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—manipulative 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 in the body, the different levels of breath energy. You learn lessons in patience, lessons in cause and effect, and 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 is the most immediate relationship between the mind and body: where 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.