

The Energy in the Body

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When Ajaan Lee talks about the breath, he's talking mainly about sensations of energy in the body. His instructions are meant to give you some ideas about how to understand the energy flow or the levels of energy in the body. He wrote Method One based on his experiences in India. He noticed the yogis over there doing all kinds of extreme practices. And he posed the question in his mind, "How do they do that? How do they find the strength to stay out under the sun or to stand on one leg for such a long period of time?" The answer that came in his meditation was that they played with the breath energy in their bodies. So he tried that, playing with the breath in various ways to get the mind in concentration, came back to Thailand, and wrote Method One.

A few years later, he went out into the forest, spent the rains retreat way up with the hill tribes outside of Chiang Mai. Soon after he arrived at the beginning of the rains retreat, he had a heart attack. No medicine. No doctors. If he was going to get out of there, he was going to have to walk out for three days. There was no other way. Nobody could drive a car or truck or anything to get him. So he spent the rains retreat just putting himself back together physically, using the breath energy again.

The monk who was with him at the time said that it was early in the rains retreat that Ajaan Lee came up with Method Two as a way of healing the body. Then at the end of the rains retreat, he was able to walk out. He got down to Bangkok and composed Method Two.

And as he taught Method Two for a while, he got into teaching the jhanas, so he added a section on jhāna at the end of the book. You look at his Dhamma talks for the remainder of his life, and you can see that he was constantly experimenting with different ways of understanding the breath, of playing with the breath energy. He talked about the breath energy coming up the spine; the breath energy coming up the front of the body; the in-and-out breath; the subtle breath, which are the breath sensations or the energy sensations that flow through the nerves, and flow out through the blood vessels, out to every pore of your skin. And then the profound breath, which is a still breath. He offered all these various ways of thinking of the breath as alternatives, different approaches that you can try out. And you get the feeling that he himself continued experimenting.

So as you're following his method, on the one hand, you want to try his general principles. Ajaan Fuang noticed, after many years of teaching breath meditation,

that if any student was having a problem with breath meditation, it was usually because one of those seven steps—or one of those seven elements of breath meditation at the beginning of Method Two—was missing. So try to keep those principles in mind: the length of the breath, the spot in the body where you're focused, the importance of getting the breath comfortable and then spreading those comfortable breath sensations throughout of the body until it feels like the whole body is breathing in unison, and your awareness can spread to fill the whole body as well. Those are the important principles.

Once you've got the basic principles down, then you can start playing with them: which way of conceiving the way the in-breath comes in the body do you find most congenial? What gives the best results? Try a few of the recommendations Ajaan Lee gives, and then if they don't seem to work for you, try a few of your own.

There are lots of different ways you can conceive of the breath energy in the body. You can think of the breath as a flow that comes in specific spots in the body when you breathe in and then it diffuses out to all your pores as you breathe out. That's one way of conceiving it. You can conceive of a still breath energy. Ajaan Fuang would talk of a column of energy that's right in the center of the body, or down the center of the front of the torso, that stays still while the breath energy comes in from all directions to that column and goes out from it to all directions. There's a lot to play with, a lot to experiment with.

And this is important, because playing and experimenting are the basic principles in developing discernment. Nobody ever gained wisdom simply by following a set of directions or a set of instructions. You follow the instructions but then you have to observe to learn what works for you, what doesn't work for you, and how to develop your own powers of judgment. Without that, wisdom is never really genuine. There are methods where, when you have an experience in your meditation, you go reporting to the teacher, and the teacher says, "Ah, yes, that's *x*, or that's *y*," and you've got to trust the teacher. You're not being taught to trust your own perceptions of things. That's dangerous. And it's limiting.

What you want to do is learn how to read your experience, get a sense of what's skillful and what's not, because this is the basis for the four noble truths. Skillful action, desirable result, unskillful action, undesirable result: Those are the basic parameters of the four truths. You have to develop your sensitivity as to what really is desirable and what's not, what's skillful and what's not. You've got to learn to see cause and effect as they happen in yourself. And the only way you can do that is by experimenting with the causes in your actions and see what different results come out.

So here you are, right at the breath, and you've got all the things you need for insight. You've got the body, feelings, mind states, mental qualities: They're all right here. The different forms of fabrication are all right here. There's bodily fabrication, which is the in-and-out breathing. Verbal fabrication: directed thought and evaluation, in which you're directing your thoughts to the breath, and evaluating the breath as it comes in and out. And mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions—feelings of comfort or discomfort, and your perception of how those relate to the breath. These are all the raw materials for insight. So you're right here where they're all present. It's simply a matter of learning how to read what's happening.

The instructions that Ajaan Lee gives are suggestions for exploration. You try them out. Experiment with them and, over time, you learn how to evaluate the results of what you're getting, as the wisdom becomes your own, the discernment becomes your own. That's when you can really do important work in the mind. As you develop greater and greater sensitivity in reading the breath, you also become more and more capable of reading the mind: what the mind is doing, the results of what it's doing. You see the events of the mind in terms of cause and effect.

This is how the insight you develop becomes really liberating, because you can see the events, and you realize the things you used to ride with, the things you used to identify with as yourself or your own: You don't want to, or you don't need to ride with them anymore. Instead of looking at them in terms of "me" or "mine," you look at them in terms of cause and effect, part of a causal chain that you have more mastery over.

And because you can see the ways in which your own intentions cause stress, that makes you look at your intentions in a new way. Any event in the mind that you've been identifying with, you learn to look at it in a new way. When you can look at it in a new way, that's when you learn how to gain release from it.

So this ability to evaluate your breath develops an important capacity in the mind, an important ability, an important sensitivity that you can't develop simply by following steps 1, 2, 3, 4 and reporting to the teacher and the teacher pats you on the head. We're not meditating to get pats on the head. We're meditating to overcome our addiction to creating suffering. That's purely an internal matter. And it can be overcome only by developing your own internal ability to see what you're doing and to evaluate the results.

So use the meditation as an opportunity to explore, to see what works. If things don't work, be more creative and more imaginative in your ways of trying out alternatives until you find something that really is peaceful for the mind, something that really is absorbing, something that really does give you insights

into what's going on. It's that kind of sensitivity that leads to release. You get beyond cause and effect by learning how to master cause and effect, and you start with simple things like this: learning to be really observant of this physical element, this physical property—the property of energy that's the closest thing in the body to your mind.