

Breath Energies

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For many of us in the West, one of the hardest parts of Ajaan Lee's breath meditation instructions to get our heads around is his discussion of breath energies in the body. As he also said, the ability to adjust these energies and to make use of them is one of the most important parts of breath meditation, because without that ability, the breath is just in and out, in and out, in and out. It gets very boring very quickly, and you're off someplace else. So it's good to try to get in touch with what these energies actually are. The fact that you can feel your body from the inside—the technical term is proprioception—is, in the Buddhist analysis, because you have these breath sensations.

The energy in the body is the medium between the mind and the other aspects of the body, like the solidity or the liquidity or the warmth. Of course, the simple fact that you're aware of the body, and the body is alive, is because there's the breath. But also, the breath is the medium through which you can make the body move and through which you're sensitive to pleasure and pain in the body. So you're already there with it. If you have any sense of your body at all, it's because of the breath.

A lot of the ability to adjust the breath has to do with your willingness to consider that it is possible. If you think it's impossible, it's not going to happen. You'll interpret the sensations of the body in other ways and won't be able to do much with them. But if you allow yourself to think that when you breathe in, there are patterns of movement in the energy into the body, you can direct them in useful ways. So try to be sensitive to them. And to help sensitive you to them, there are various ways of conceiving them.

Sometimes Ajaan Lee talks about breath channels in the body. There's one that goes down through the spine. Another breath channel goes through the front of the body, right down the middle. There are breath channels in your head, breath channels down your legs and your arms. Some of these correspond to the nerves, some of them to the blood vessels, and others are just patterns of movement. There's no nerve going down the front of your body, but there is a sense of movement.

You might want to start asking yourself questions about the energy flow. When you breathe in, does the energy seem to go up? Does it seem to go down? Some people, when they breathe in, pull something up in the head in order to pull the breath in. It probably comes from a time when you had trouble breathing

through a stuffed nose and there was a sense of trying to pull up through the stuffed nose. Over time, you got used to that idea that when you breathe in, you have to pull it up.

This is a lot of where Zen sickness comes from, that malady that Hakuin complained about. You get headaches very easily by sitting and meditating because there's a sense of pulling up, up, up as you breathe in. It puts a lot of pressure in your head. So if you find that that's a problem, think "down." As you breathe in, the energy goes down, starting from the top of the head. But if you push down too much, then you start feeling depleted. So try to notice what you can feel and play with what you can feel to strike a good balance.

Once you notice the breath energy going one way, ask yourself: Could it go the opposite way down the same channel? See what happens. Which is better? As you play with what you're sensitive to, you find that there are other areas that you weren't sensitive to in the beginning, but as you get more and more accustomed to thinking in terms of the breath in this way—and as your mind begins to settle down—you get more sensitive to what's going on in those parts of the body, too.

You begin to see connections you didn't expect. Sometimes, when there's a pain in one part of the body, we tend to associate, "Well, if there's a pain there, there must be a blockage in the breath right there." So we focus all our attention on the area around the pain. But that's not necessarily the source of the problem. Sometimes a pain in one side of the body is caused by a blockage on another side.

A good rule of thumb is if say you've got a pain in the lower right side of your back—if you find that focusing on the breath energy there doesn't seem to have much effect on the pain or if it seems to be making it worse—focus on the lower left side; focus on the front, left or right. Or there may be something up in your neck that's causing pain further down in the body, and vice versa. If there's a stiffness in your neck, you might want to look at the flow of energy down at the base of the spine.

Ajaan Fuang talked about how he used to get really bad headaches and he began to notice that the headaches were coming from the area down around his kidneys. So he'd think of the breath energy coming in the back of the neck, going down the spine and then out the tailbone and into the ground. That relieved a lot of the pressure in his head.

Ajaan Lee has a good piece of advice. If you have a pain in one part of the body, think of the breath energy going through the pain. Don't let it stop right at the pain, because that builds up the perception of the pain as a wall, which actually aggravates the problem. So if you've got a pain in your knee, think of the breath going down through the knee, down through the shin, and out through the toes.

Think also of breath energy around your body, a kind of a cocoon of energy around the body. Even before you can directly feel it, you can allow yourself to imagine it. Tell yourself, “If there were a cocoon of energy around the body, does this feel like a good cocoon?” Notice whatever you can feel.

Think of energy coming in the chakras around the chest, the neck, the middle of the forehead. How does that feel? Just hold that perception in mind, because a lot of this does have to do with perception. If your perceptions say that this is impossible, then they’re going to block your ability to sense these things. If you allow yourself to perceive them as possible, then you open up all kinds of possibilities.

The more you get to know the body, the more you can play. You begin to realize that there are some ways of playing with the breath energy that are actually not helpful. When you try to force the energy too much, you can give yourself a headache. So there is a skill here that requires a light touch. And it’s useful, both because it allows you to get interested in the present moment and because it creates a better place for you to stay. It’s more comfortable.

At the same time, you learn a lot about this process of fabrication: how the in-and-out breathing has an effect on the different parts of the body; how your perceptions have an impact on the breath, in addition to an impact on the mind. They talk about perceptions being mental fabrications, having an effect on the mind, but they also have an impact on the body, too.

This way, you begin to see cause and effect as the causal influences goes back and forth. Certain causes in the body have an effect in the mind. Certain causes in the mind have an effect in the body. One of the important facts about insight that’s all too often forgotten is that it’s insight into cause and effect. Remember the insight that the Buddha would describe when he would try to express the knowledge that led to his awakening: It was this/that conditionality—a principle of causality. It wasn’t just that things are impermanent, and therefore they’re stressful, and therefore you should let them go.

You use those three perceptions to see more: When things change, when they’re inconstant, what are you doing? Particularly when you’re working with the breath, working with the mind getting it to settle down, what did you do when something changed, when it got more still or less still? The changes alert you that something’s going on: A movement in the mind was actually important. So the change is there not just to be something to get dispassionate about. It’s there as a signal to alert you to the fact that something in your mind has changed. You want to see what was the intentional element in that change, because that’s something you can do something about. And that’s where the real attachment is.

So as you play with the breath like this, it's not just play, as I've said before. It's both play and working. You work with the breath because you're doing something serious here. You're learning important truths about the body and the mind. You're playing because it's fun and you can use your ingenuity, your imagination. Think about the breath in your bones. Think about some part of the body where you've never really considered the possibility of breath before and allow yourself to imagine that the breath is moving there. After all, if there were no movement of this subtle breath in the body at all, you'd be paralyzed. You wouldn't have any sensation in that part of the body. That's the moving breath.

Then there's the still breath. There's a passage where Ajaan Lee says not to expand the moving breath. Expand the still breath. Well, that depends on what stage you are in the concentration. In the beginning, you want to expand the moving breath. But after a while, after you've got things moved around and everything seems to be flowing, you want the mind to find a greater level of stillness. This is where you ask yourself, "Okay, which parts of the body, even when the breath is moving, are still? Which parts of the body seem to be moving other parts of the body?" That's another question you can ask. If you can sense them, just think of the stillness within those parts of the body. Think of that stillness as nourishing them.

And that stillness can spread, so that when you breathe in, breathe out, instead of a lot of movement around the body, there's just stillness, stillness, stillness spreading throughout the body. The breath is still moving in and out, but Ajaan Lee has a good analogy for this. It's like the vapor coming off of an ice cube. The ice cube is solid, there's a subtle movement of vapor around it, yet the movement of the vapor doesn't penetrate the ice cube. Tapping into that level of breath energy, the still energy, gets the mind even more still. It gives you a much more solid foundation. Ajaan Lee calls, in Thai, the *lom nio*, which is a hard word to translate into English, because it can mean sticky, but it also means tough, durable; without any gaps.

And if you stick with that solid sense of breath, think of it connecting everything in the body—all the still parts of the body are connecting with one another. They strengthen one another. The sense of the in-and-out breath gets more and more refined, more and more refined, until you don't even notice that it's coming in or out. There's no sense of it coming in or out. It's just stillness, stillness, stillness—both in the body and in the mind.

These are some of the ways in which working with the breath energy has lots of rewards. And it makes a huge difference in how the breath meditation goes.