

Occupy Your Body

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Ajaan Lee has a phrase that's worth thinking about. It's "concentration work." We come to concentration to rest, but for the mind really to rest, to have a sense of belonging here in the present moment, fully inhabiting the present moment, often takes some work. The factors that do the work are directed thought and evaluation: keeping your mind directed to the breath, and then evaluating how things are going as you try to settle down.

Think of the image of the bathman that the Buddha uses when he talks about the first jhana, working the water through the pile of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn't have bars of soap. They had bath powder that you would mix with water, and then have a ball of paste or dough-like substance that you would rub over your body. To prepare that ball was like working water into a pile of flour to make the dough for bread. You have to knead very carefully to make sure there are no dry spots and no places where the water is dripping out. Everything mixes together properly. In the same way, the Buddha says, as you develop a sense of ease, well-being, rapture, and you let that spread through the body, and you work it through the body. It's as if you're kneading the pleasure and ease through the body.

If you don't do this work, the mind can't settle down properly. It may veer off and just leave the body entirely. A lot of people like that. There are some people that go through childhood trauma, and they're pretty good at getting out of the body. But it's not a very stable state. You have to keep coming back, coming back, to the issues in the body to reach an understanding. If there's a pain in some part of the body, how can you work around it? How can you get so that the pain can be there, but it's not attacking you? In other words, you're not sucking it in.

And it is possible, when there's a physical pain in the body, for the mind to settle down in the body and yet not be pushed away by the pain. You learn to look at all the comfortable spots around the pain. There was a book printed years ago called *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, in which the author talked about how a good way to learn to draw a sketch of somebody's face is not to focus on the eyes, or the nose, or the mouth, or whatever, because we tend to have preconceived notions about what those look like. Instead, the author said to look at the spaces in between. When you're looking at somebody's face, what's the shape of the area between the nose and the eye? Or between the nose and the lips? The lips and the chin? Or the eye and the eyebrow? In other words, focus on all

the parts of the face that you didn't focus on before, and that lets you see it more clearly. You tend to draw a much better likeness.

It's a similar process here. There may be a pain in the body, but instead of getting sucked into the pain, you focus on everything around the pain. You find that there is a sense of well-being there, and you can tap into that, and then start letting it spread around. If there are patterns of tension around the pain, think of that sense of ease moving through them—think of the breath as able to go through mountains. In other words, it can go through the solid parts, or solid-seeming parts of the pain, realizing that they're not as solid as they may have originally seemed. They're a lot more porous.

As you're working through the body in this way, sometimes you'll find old issues come up, because memories can get locked into different parts of the body. A sudden memory of something happening in your childhood may appear.

One time I was working on a chronic tight spot in my foot, and all of a sudden there was a release. Along with the release, I had a sudden memory of when I was six years old and had jumped out of the second-story of our barn onto a pile of hay. It turned out there was a nail on the hay and it went through my foot. I had been carrying around the somatic memory of that wound since I was six. And working through the tension around there allowed it to release.

Now, sometimes it's not a physical trauma. Sometimes it's a mental trauma that you're going to remember. So you have to be prepared for things coming up in the meditation, old memories you'd rather not have to remember. But if you have a sense of stability in the rest of the body, and a sense of stability in your mind, you can allow them to come and wash over you and pass by; be gone.

So it takes work to settle down in the body because there's not just the issue of physical pain here, and there's not just the issue of distraction. Sometimes old memories are buried in here, but you're given the tools to work with them—tools that are related not only to the concentration, but also to the teachings on karma. If you come up against something that's unpleasant from the past, you have to remind yourself that there was some karma involved. You don't have to go into all the details, but just tell yourself, "There must have been some karmic process going on there." Learn to accept it for what it is, and it's a lot easier to handle that way.

As you work through these things, you find that the mind can settle down more firmly in the present moment and really inhabit the body. In this way, you're more solidly here, and there's also protection that comes from this. If all the breath energies in the body work together, they can help you repel the energies of other people.

There was a woman who came to meditate at the monastery one time. A friend of hers was working in the kitchen, and she had told Ajaan Fuang that the woman who was coming had had a chronic problem in her meditation. Every time she sat down to meditate, she'd start shaking. And sure enough, she came to the monastery, and as we were sitting as a group, she started shaking. Ajaan Fuang had another student who was quite psychic, and he told her, "Check her out. See what's going on."

And so the student did. She saw two beings standing behind the woman, shaking her. So she immediately, in her vision, went up and said, "Stop doing that. Why are you harassing her like this?" They turned on her and scared her so much that she had to go running out to throw up outside. She came back in and reported to Ajaan Fuang what she had seen. He said, "You fool. You've got to protect yourself before you deal with things like this." And the way he said to protect herself was to fill her body with a sense of light, which goes with the breath, and then spread lots of goodwill to the beings, and then you can talk to them.

And so she did. She found out that these beings had been this woman's parents in a previous lifetime. And the woman had killed them. They didn't like the idea that she was going to get away without having to repay the debt they felt she owed them. A corollary to the story was that the student had asked these beings, "What could she do to pay off the debt?" And they said, "Build a Buddha image and dedicated it to us."

Now, the problem was that we were building a Buddha image at the time. So when the student came to see Ajaan Fuang, he said, "You can't say anything to her about this, because it'll sound like you're trying to get money for our image." He said to just leave the case be. Maybe someday, of her own accord, she would build a Buddha image. And sure enough, two years later she did—and the shaking stopped.

The takeaway from that is that when you're dealing with obstreperous spirits—and obstreperous spirits include human beings—(1) you've got to fill your body with the good breath awareness, really inhabit your body, and then (2) protect yourself also with goodwill, goodwill in all directions to all beings. But for this to work, you've got to work through the issues you've got in settling down in the body.

So if you find you have these issues, this is work that's well worth the effort, getting so that you're familiar with different parts of the body that you've cut off for one reason or another. You're able to sift through areas: If there's a chronic pain in some part of the body, how do you breathe around it? How do you

breathe through it? How do you get your awareness around it? Get so that you feel that you inhabit the body, you feel that this is your space, in the sense that you're not going to let the pain push you out. Of course, there's a paradox here. On the one hand, ultimately we don't want to lay claim to the body as us or ours, but before you can really let go of it, you've got to fully inhabit it, make use of the space. Because only if you can fully inhabit the space can you be fully at ease with your own mind. And that's when the mind can really settle down.

When you've done the concentration work, then there comes a point where you've done as much directed thought and evaluation as you can. You've gotten the best results you can. That's when you can sit with whatever is there. You can move in, and then it's just simply a process of maintaining what you've got. The concentration gets more and more subtle. The fact that the mind is still means that the brain is using less oxygen, and so the need to breathe becomes more and more refined, more and more gentle, until it can stop.

The first time this happens, it can be a little scary. You realize, "Oh, my breath has really stopped." You can't remember how long it was since you took your last breath. But don't get scared. If the body needs to breathe, it'll breathe. You just make sure that everything in the body is connected. All the breath energy channels are connected, and the oxygen exchange at the skin will be enough to keep you going.

It's only when you've reached this state that the mind can go safely into the more formless states of concentration. Because you've learned how to maintain one perception in mind—the perception of the breath, the perception of the whole body—and then allow your awareness to expand at the same time. This skill is what allows you to go solidly into the formless states, where the sense of the body disappears. You are sitting here. You haven't gone anywhere else. If you need to have the body, you can form it.

It's like that old science fiction story about teleporting people to the moon. They were working on the technology of teleportation and, according to the story, they still had to iron out some bugs. The main bug was that the bones were slower than everything else. So, say, if you sent a cat or a rabbit up to the moon, it would pour out as a liquid of body without the bones. You'd have this bowl full of cat until the bones arrived. And if, before the bones came, the cat needed something, it would suddenly show its mouth, and it could form itself into a mouth for a while, and it could sometimes get up and jump around in a liquid kind of way.

It's the same as you're coming out of the formless states. When you realize you need the body for something, you have a body again. It seems to have dispersed,

dissolved in the meantime, but then when the time comes that you need it, everything will come back together again. You don't have to worry.

Now, this is different from leaving the body in the sense of getting outside the body. You don't want to do that, because it's dangerous. You're leaving your body unprotected, and you're unprotected outside. But if you're here, right where the body is, then even though there's no sense of the body, you're still perfectly safe.

But to get to this formless state, you've got to do the concentration work. Work through the issues in the body that are connected with the mind, so that you can inhabit the body fully. The sense of well-being that results makes it a lot easier to spread goodwill to all the obstreperous beings out there, all the obstreperous people you're going to encounter.

When you've done the work, that's when you can rest. Ajaan Lee talks about the formless states as being like someone who's done a job and is now living off a pension, whereas being in the form states of jhāna is like continuing to work and getting your salary, enjoying it at the same time.

This is where the real work is done. This is how the work keeps paying, with a sense of well-being, with a sense of belonging here. And as the mind is allowed to spread out, it feels very spacious. It becomes a good place to be.