

## *A Cocoon of Energy*

*November 4, 2021*

In one of the very early editions of *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, Ajaan Lee gave some instructions about sending the breath energy down the spine, both inside the spine and on the outside side of the spine—in other words, outside the skin. I didn't encounter this version of his instructions until many years after I'd first encountered his method. Sometimes I wish he had left it in, because it would have expanded my notion of what's possible with the breath. The breath energy in the body does not end with the skin. There's a cocoon of breath energy that surrounds the body. Sometimes it's useful to think about that, especially as a way of transitioning into the perception of space.

We're so attached to our bodies. Even when our thoughts go into great abstractions, they're rooted right here. If anything happens to the body, it immediately pulls you right back. And as they've shown, a lot of our nerve-endings are down in the stomach, and they determine our moods. So, we have this pull inside the body. When we face the prospect that we might have to leave this body, it gets very scary. So a good way of not getting scared by that is to start thinking about just an inch or two outside the body—and not yet full space. You're thinking about the breath energy just outside the skin.

So devote some time to thinking about the breath energy flowing down outside of the spine. This is especially useful when there's a sense of blockage in any part of the body. Think of the breath energy flowing around outside. It can have an influence on the breath energy inside the body, just as the currents of the sea and the winds that flow above the sea parallel each other. This is one of the ways you can work through a blockage without trying to force things through. It opens things up. The mind gets more and more used to being with something that's a little bit vaguer than the body, with less of a clear form. Then you can end up getting into the sensation of space.

What does the space around your body feel like? If you find that this exercise is too disorienting, go back to the sensation of the body. Think of the breath, think of the warmth, think of the coolness, think of the solidity, and you'll be fully back in your body. As you get back into the body, you get a little bit more secure. You realize that you can get back into the body any time you want. You're not deprived of contact with the body. So, the next time you want to try space, try it again, knowing that you can get back in when you need to.

This exercise is also useful when there's a very strong sense of the body as heavy: in the words of the Commentary, a sack full of beans where the energy

doesn't penetrate. When the body seems too much of a solid lump for energy to penetrate, the energy can still flow around smoothly outside because there's nothing to obstruct it.

Again, it's like winds. Around the Southern Ocean around Antarctica, there're no land masses to obstruct the winds, so the winds can go very smoothly. In fact, sometimes too smoothly. They get very fast and strong. In the same way, here there's nothing to obstruct you, nothing to obstruct the breath energy as it flows around the body. So you can ask yourself as you breathe in, "Suppose there were a cocoon of energy around the body, how would you identify where that energy was flowing?" Try to get sensitive to what you feel. You're using your imagination here, of course, but you're not totally making things up. You're opening your imagination to possibilities, and trying to get more and more sensitive to what's actually there.

Like the ozone hole: For years, satellites were sending back information saying there's a big hole in the ozone layer over Antarctica, but the computer programs hadn't been designed to accept that information. They kept throwing the information out, saying that it was impossible—because the engineers who had designed the programs thought it was impossible. Their imagination had no room for the idea. This went on for years with nobody noticing.

In the same way, if you don't think it's possible for you to sense the energy flowing around the body, you're not going to sense it. Your mind will block out any movements out there, or interpret them in other ways.

So, what about these fringes around the body? How do they feel? When you breathe in, which direction does the energy flow? Can you think of good energy from this cocoon flowing into the body where you need it? This is a useful exercise right now and, as I said, it's going to be useful when the time comes when you have to leave this body. You're not going to be so desperate to have to latch on to another body.

I've told this story before, but it bears repeating. One of Ajaan Fuang's students, Yom Taem, was meditating one night, and a voice came to her and said, "You're going to die tonight." She said to herself, "As long as I'm going to die, I might as well die while meditating." So, she continued to sit. And sure enough, her body became more and more uncomfortable, to the point where there was no place in the body at all where she could rest her awareness with any sense of ease. She said it was like being in a house on fire. No matter which room you went into, the place was hot. So, what she was going to do?

She thought of space. Now, strictly speaking, to get into the dimension of the infinitude of space, you have to go through the fourth jhana where the breath has stopped, and the sense of the body begins to dissolve. But it's also possible to hold on to this perception of space even before you get to that level

of concentration. It may not count as that formless attainment, but it is a perception of formlessness. It's good to get the mind used to that perception so that you don't feel cast adrift. The more steadily you can hold on to this perception, the better.

This way, you learn how to replace your preconceived notions with the Buddha's perceptions. Now, some people may complain that his perceptions are also preconceived notions. And it's true, but they're useful ones. They've been tested by time, tested by awakened people, and they give good results. That's what matters.

All language is a matter of convention, simply that some conventions are more useful than others. In this case, it's a convention that opens your mind to new possibilities: possibilities that really are fruitful. So, take this notion of a cocoon of energy around the body and add it to your repertoire of what's possible. See what benefits you gain.