

# Healing Meditation Techniques of Selected Thai Meditation Masters<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This article examines the meditation instructions and other information relevant to health and healing given by three Buddhist masters of Thailand: the late Venerable Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, the late Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, and Venerable Ajahn Damrong. Despite some differences in their methods, all three teachers advocate intentionally adjusting the length of the breath and using the long breath for enhancing physical health, which in turn supports meditation and mental health.

## Introduction

Venerable Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, in his talk “The Power of Goodness”, related the story of a former student of Venerable Sāriputta who had disrobed, become a thief, and was caught and sentenced to torture for seven days, being skewered by sharp spears, followed by execution. Through his mental power, Venerable Sāriputta saw this and went to the place where the student was being tortured, amidst a crowd of people, so that the student could see him.

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Catching sight of Venerable Sāriputta, the former student was filled with joy and, remembering his teacher's meditation instructions, began to still his mind with mindfulness of breathing. As he focused on the breath, the breath grew still, his wounds stopped bleeding, closed up, and healed. He surveyed his body parts until the severed parts reconnected, and he was able to sit up on the tips of the spears and enter into *jhāna*.<sup>3</sup> With the attainment of the fourth *jhāna*, his body became very light and stronger than the spears, which were then unable to pierce his body, and he came out of the torture alive.<sup>4</sup>

Like the student, Phra Ajahn Lee himself put his own body back together after having a heart attack on a remote mountain outside of Chiang Mai, with no access to any medicine or doctors, purely by using breathing meditation and breath energy, according to Thanissaro Bhikkhu.<sup>5</sup> After recovering from the heart attack, Ajahn Lee wrote his "Method 2" meditation instructions as a way of curing and healing the body.

While perfect physical health is not the goal of Buddhist practice and meditation (and indeed not even possible – the Buddha instructed that everyone should frequently recollect that they are subject to illness, aging, and death, certain to become ill, age, and die), the Buddha and many Buddhist masters have recognized that strength and health are advantageous, conducive to meditation and spiritual practice, and have taught at length about physical health and healing (in addition to mental health and healing, the primary concern). Among such masters are three remarkable teachers from Thailand: Venerable Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo, Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu, and Venerable Ajahn Damrong, and their teachings on meditation practices for healing will be presented in this article.

The health benefits of meditation has been a popular subject for scientific research in the past few decades, yet it is not often emphasized or discussed in depth by meditation teachers, especially in the past, making these three masters exceptional. Meditation and health, however, is quite in line with the canonical teachings. For

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<sup>3</sup> A state of concentration in meditation.

<sup>4</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, "The Power of Goodness".

<sup>5</sup> Thanissaro, "The Energy in the Body".

example, one of the five purposes of *satipaṭṭhāna*, according to the Buddha, is the disappearance of pain and grief (*dukkhadomanassā*), so mindfulness meditation is precisely for dealing with both physical and mental pain and suffering. Venerables Dhammadharo, Buddhādāsa, and Damrong all base their meditation instructions on *satipaṭṭhāna*, and encourage students to observe and understand the breath, the body, and the mind for themselves, in order to promote health and healing.

### Venerable Lee Dhammadharo

The renowned meditation master Phra Ajahn Lee Dhammadharo (1906-1961) is considered the first to introduce the ascetic forest tradition into the general Thai society in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Among his teachings, Lee's "Method 2" meditation instructions are to, as he said, "use the body to benefit the mind... since the well-being of the mind depends to some extent on the body".<sup>6</sup>

Before beginning meditation, Ajahn Lee instructed that a practitioner should pay respect to and take refuge in the Triple Gem,<sup>7</sup> take the five precepts, and spread the four *brahma vihāras* – good will, compassion, appreciative joy, and equanimity – toward all living beings. One can then begin meditation. Ajahn Lee gave seven steps for "Method 2" meditation, as follows:<sup>8</sup>

- 1) Start with three or seven long in-and-out breaths, thinking "bud" with the entire length of the in-breath, "dho" with the out-breath.
- 2) Be clearly aware of each in-and-out breath.
- 3) Observe the breath and notice whether it is comfortable or uncomfortable, broad or narrow, obstructed or free-flowing, fast or slow, short or long, warm or cool. Adjust the breath until it feels comfortable. When the breathing feels comfortable, let this comfortable breath sensation spread throughout the body.

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<sup>6</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> The Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted and paraphrased from Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 17-18.

- Inhale the breath sensation at the base of the skull, and let it flow down the spine. Then, for men, let it spread down the right leg, down the toes, and out into the air, then again with the left leg. For women, left leg first, then right.
  - Let the breath from the base of the skull spread down the shoulders, arms, fingers, and out into the air.
  - Let the breath at the base of the throat spread down the central nerve at the front of the body, past the lungs, liver, bladder, and colon.
  - Inhale the breath at the middle of the chest and let it go down the intestines.
  - Let all these breath sensations spread so that they connect and flow together, which will give you a greatly improved sense of well-being.
- 4) Learn four ways of adjusting the breath: a) in long and out long; b) in short and out short; c) in short and out long; d) in long and out short. Breathe in whichever way is most comfortable for you. Learn to breathe comfortably in all four ways.
  - 5) Learn the bases or focal points for the mind – the resting spots for the breath – and center your awareness on whichever one seems most comfortable. Some of these bases are: a) the tip of the nose; b) the middle of the head; c) the palate; d) the base of the throat; e) the breastbone; f) the navel (or a point just above it). For those who have frequent headaches or nervous problems, do not focus on any spot above the base of the throat. Do not force the breath. Breathe freely and naturally. Let the mind be at ease with the breath, but not to the point where the mind slips away.
  - 6) Spread your awareness – your sense of conscious feeling – throughout the entire body.
  - 7) Unite the breath sensations throughout the body, letting them flow together comfortably, keeping your awareness as broad as possible. You will come to know many aspects of the breath, such as: breath sensations flowing in the nerves; those flowing around and about the nerves; those spreading from the nerves to every pore. Beneficial breath sensations and harmful ones are mixed together by their very nature.

These seven steps are fundamental to every aspect of breath meditation, according to Phra Ajahn Lee, and they should be kept in mind “for the sake of improving the energy already in every part of the body, so that you can contend with such things as disease and pain and for the sake of clarifying the knowledge already within you, so that it can become a basis for the skills leading to release and purity of heart”.<sup>9</sup> Lee described that the various signs that arise from the breath (*nimitta*), once mastered, can give rise to higher powers, including the abilities to: taste various elements in the air in order to overcome hunger or desire; give rise to certain feelings one wishes to feel, such as feeling cool, warm, or strong; give rise to a heightened mind; see past lives; cleanse the heart of defilements; and gain knowledge of the Four Noble Truths.

By understanding and using the breath with awareness, one can relieve physical pain, Ajahn Lee taught: “Mindfulness is the active ingredient in the medicine; the in-and-out breath is the solvent. Mindfulness can cleanse and purify the breath. A pure breath can cleanse the blood throughout the body, and when the blood is cleansed, it can relieve many of the body’s diseases and pains.”<sup>10</sup> Nervous disorders will disappear and the body will be strengthened, giving one a greater sense of health and wellness, held Ajahn Lee. He summarized:

If you know how to adjust and vary the breath – if you’re always thinking about and evaluating the breath – you’ll become thoroughly mindful and expert in all matters dealing with the breath and the other elements of the body. You’ll always know how things are going with the body. Rapture, ease, and singleness of preoccupation will come on their own. The body will be refreshed, the mind content. Both body and mind will be at peace. All the elements will be at peace, free from unrest and disturbances.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 35.

<sup>10</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 38.

<sup>11</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Keeping the Breath in Mind*, 45.

Ajahn Lee compared meditation to washing and bathing the body and mind. One should put the whole body at ease in every way and not let the mind become involved in outside thoughts. If the body is made to work day and night without rest and sleep, we kill ourselves, he said; similarly if the mind keeps working and thinking without rest, we are killing ourselves, weakening the strength of mind. “Centering our minds,” however, Ajahn described, is “like eating our fill, bathing ourselves till we’re thoroughly clean, and then taking a good nap. When we wake up, we feel bright, refreshed, and strong enough to take on any job at all.” Right concentration is thus revitalizing and energizing:

This is why the Buddha was able to develop such strength of mind that he was able to do without food, for example, for seven full days and yet not feel tired or weak. This was because his mind was able to rest and be still in the four levels of absorption. His concentration was strong and gave great strength to his body, his speech, and his mind.<sup>12</sup>

The mind has a close relationship to the body and to health, so Venerable Lee urged that pain and disease should be understood as a natural truth, that of *dukkha*,<sup>13</sup> and should be dealt with simply as a natural truth of the body, without worry and stress, which can aggravate illness:

If we try to fight nature and not let there be disease, or if we want it to disappear right away, sometimes we make the disease even worse. But if we treat the disease without worrying about whether or not it’ll go away, it will follow its natural course and go away at its own pace without too much trouble or suffering on our part. This is because the mind isn’t struggling to fight nature, and so the body is strong enough to contend with the disease.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Centered Within”, *Food for Thought*.

<sup>13</sup> Dukkha, usually translated as “suffering”, may also be translated as “unsatisfactoriness”, “difficulty”, “pain”, and “stress”.

<sup>14</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Respect for Truth”, *Food for Thought*.

Venerable Lee explained in his essay “For the Relief of Suffering”<sup>15</sup> that illnesses are due to either physical causes – disorders and disturbances of the five physical properties: earth, water, fire, air, and space (i.e. the solid parts of the body, liquid parts of the body, warmth, movement and breath, and empty spaces in the body); or kammic causes – acts of the mind (*kamma citta*) – thinking of upsetting topics which weakens mental energy and unbalances the mind, allowing disease to arise. There are thus two kinds of cures for disease, according to Ajahn Lee: pharmaceutical medicines, which bring the properties of the body back into balance, and Dhamma medicine – “depending on ourselves to improve ourselves, turning our minds to topics that are good, worthwhile, and wise” including vowing to do good, making donations, observing the precepts, making Buddha images, chanting, and meditation. “In some cases,” said Venerable Lee, “when a good intention arises in the heart and we feel happy and expansive, it gives energy to the heart and inner strength to the body, through which we can alleviate any diseases that have arisen.”<sup>16</sup>

Furthermore, there are two kinds of relationships between kamma and illness, explained Ajahn Lee: 1) *kamma vipaka*, the results of past actions which can upset the physical properties in the present and allow disease to arise. In this case, both the physical and the mental, kammic causes should be treated to relieve the pain; 2) *kamma citta*, new acts of the mind which can give rise to disease. For example, extreme anger, hatred, love, or restlessness agitate the mind, and the “defilements that enwrap [the mind] splash into the body, where they mix with the various properties of the body – in the blood, for instance, which then flows to the various parts of the body, causing weakness and fatigue.” If this blood stagnates in any part of the body, disease can arise there. “The mind becomes murky, the properties of the body are murky,” so we must correct the situation quickly, using the two kinds of medicine.<sup>17</sup> Ajahn Lee himself experienced what he believed was an illness due to past kamma. One year he fell ill with severe stomach pains that would not go away with any medicine. During an overnight

<sup>15</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Handbook for the Relief of Suffering”.

<sup>16</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Handbook for the Relief of Suffering”.

<sup>17</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Handbook for the Relief of Suffering”.

meditation, he had a vision of a thin and hungry dove in a birdcage, and he realized his disease was a kammic disease, the fruit of this past action – keeping a pet dove and forgetting to feed it for many days. “Therefore, there was only one way to cure it – to do good by way of the mind,” he concluded. Sometime after this, he instructed and consoled a Chinese woman for several days, she learned the Dhamma well from him, and after teaching her, his stomach pains, which had lasted thirty-one days straight, completely vanished.<sup>18</sup>

Ajahn Lee also recounted a remarkable story of helping to cure a woman who had been paralyzed for three years, unable to move or talk, with no previous medical treatment being effective for her. Ajahn Lee was invited to the woman’s house, and when he arrived, the woman feebly raised her hands in a *wai*.<sup>19</sup> He sat down near her and meditated; the woman moved a bit, sat up to *wai* him again, and then kneeled by her pillow. He said to her: “Get well. Be done with your old kamma.” He then told her to come light his cigarette, which she was able to do. Gradually she recovered; the next day she was able to crawl around, after one month she was able to walk, and after two years she was perfectly healthy and could walk long distances.<sup>20</sup>

Venerable Lee however was clear that mental health is the essential concern. “Strength of body...can’t help but waste away and vanish by its very nature. It can’t escape from aging, illness, and death...Strength of mind is more important than strength of body.”<sup>21</sup> The mind is strengthened towards good by the five powers (*bala*): conviction (an aspect of virtue), persistence, mindfulness, concentration, and discernment. If a person can overcome the five hindrances and attain deep concentration, “such a person is sure to be full in body and mind – free from hunger, poverty, and want,” said Ajahn Lee. He exhorted his listeners: “Worldly wealth is what fosters strength of body; noble wealth is what fosters strength of mind. So I ask that we all put this teaching into practice, training ourselves and polishing our thoughts, words, and deeds so that they’re worthy and pure, reaching

<sup>18</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajaan Lee*, 40-43.

<sup>19</sup> A gesture of greeting and respect.

<sup>20</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *The Autobiography of Phra Ajahn Lee*, 66-67.

<sup>21</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength*, 6.



the stage of noble wealth, which is the path to the highest happiness: *nibbāna*.”<sup>22</sup>

### Venerable Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu

Buddhadāsa Bhikkhu (1906-1993), the highly influential teacher, scholar, and meditation master, in his book *Mindfulness with Breathing: Unveiling the Secrets of Life*, discussed at length the importance of the breath and its connection to the body. The breath-body, he explained, nourishes the flesh-body, and it can be used to affect and control the flesh-body; by regulating the breath, one can regulate the body. For example, by calming the breath, the body will become calm. Venerable Buddhādāsa’s instructions are based precisely on the steps given in the Ānāpānasati Sutta, along with further interpretation and detail, including practical benefits and uses of breathing related to mental and physical health.

To begin meditation practice, instructed Venerable Buddhādāsa, one should choose a peaceful and quiet place (as much as is available), sit upright in a stable cross-legged posture, start with the eyes open, gaze at the tip of the nose, and be mindful of each in and out breath. “Let the breathing go on comfortably and normally. Let it be natural. Do not interfere with it at all. Then contemplate each breath with mindfulness. How are we breathing in? What is the out-breath like? Use *sati* [mindfulness] to note the ordinary breath...This is the first lesson: contemplate the breath with *sati*.”<sup>23</sup> Various qualities of the breath can be observed, such as long or short, smooth or bumpy, fine or coarse, and the reactions and effects the different breaths have on the body and mind can be observed.

Following this preliminary step, one trains with and contemplates the long breath. One observes and examines the long breath and its effects on the body, the movements, expansions, and contractions of the body during the long breath, and the happiness and comfort the long breath brings to the body. Next, one similarly contemplates the short breath. According to Ajahn Buddhādāsa, “we

<sup>22</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Inner Strength*, 8.

<sup>23</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 25.

will observe and feel immediately that the long breath brings ease and comfort while the short breath leads to abnormality, that is, uneasiness, agitation, and discomfort. With this knowledge, we will know how to make the body either comfortable or uncomfortable by regulating the breath.”<sup>24</sup> One can cool down the body, drive away anger, and relax the body by making the breath long and fine.

The next step of breathing meditation as taught by Buddhadāsa is to observe more deeply that there are two bodies (*kaya* – group, pile, heap, or collection): the breath-body and the flesh-body, and that the breath-body conditions, nourishes, and supports the flesh-body. These two bodies or groups are intimately connected, and by seeing how the breath conditions the body, we can learn how to regulate the flesh-body by regulating the breath-body. Then we may practice step four, which is to calm the breath. As we calm the breath, “the flesh-body will become very gentle, relaxed, and tranquil. Then there will arise a calming of the mind, also.”<sup>25</sup> Buddhadāsa continued in the subsequent steps to explain techniques to calm the breath and give rise to *nimitta*, or signs, and gain *jhāna* and concentration.

In summary, “we will have good health if we learn to breathe properly,” Venerable Buddhadāsa advised.<sup>26</sup> As the body is the foundation for the mind, and as we can control the body by regulating the breath, we can change our thoughts and emotions by adjusting the breath, such as breathing long to remove anger, worry, or unwanted thoughts, taught Ajahn Buddhadāsa.

Venerable Buddhadāsa further articulated this process in his talk “What is Anapanasati?”, in which he discussed *ānāpānasati* as including *prāṇayama*, “control of breath”, which equates to control of life, he stated. Buddhadāsa explained that by studying the breath, we can make our *prāṇa* (Pali: *pāna*; breath, life force, that which preserves and nurtures life) healthy and correct, which will make our lives correct: “To be able to control the *prāṇa* is to be able to control the thing which enters to preserve life. Then we get a life that is fresh and

<sup>24</sup> Buddhadāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 30.

<sup>25</sup> Buddhadāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 39.

<sup>26</sup> Buddhadāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 94.

cheerful, which is ready and fit for training and practice.”<sup>27</sup> Thus, breath control is a significant part of physical and mental well-being as well as meditation and spiritual practice. Venerable Buddhādāsa explained further:

If we adjust the *prāṇa*-body well, so that it is good, healthy, and calm, it makes the flesh-body good, healthy, and calm. Such *prāṇa* is able to cause the greatest peace and calm in this life...You ought to study and train the breath well in order to use it to your advantage in conditioning the flesh-body...Being able to regulate the *prāṇa*-body is equivalent to regulating the flesh-body as we need, namely, making it calm and peaceful. We develop this knowledge until we are able to regulate the *prāṇa*. Then we can arrange to have a good, healthy body that is ready for the concentrating of the *citta*.<sup>28</sup>

However, Buddhādāsa underscored that the real disease which the Buddha’s teachings address and aim to cure is spiritual disease – ignorance and wrong view, rooted in clinging to “I” and “mine”, from which springs the defilements of greed, hatred, delusion, selfishness, harm, and suffering.<sup>29</sup> As the Buddha concluded that *dukkha* is, essentially, the five clung-to aggregates, therefore whatever is clung to as “I” or “mine” is *dukkha*. If birth, old age, sickness, and death are clung to as “I” or “mine”, there is suffering; if birth, old age, sickness, death, the body, the mind, and anything at all are not clung to as “I” or “mine”, there is no suffering, no *dukkha*. Thus, the essential point, the heart of the Buddhist teachings and of all Dhamma is: “Nothing whatsoever should be clung to” (*Sabbe dhamma nalam abhinivesaya*), according to Venerable Buddhādāsa. This is the antidote and antibody to spiritual disease; by understanding this truth one can resist and eliminate spiritual disease. “The feeling of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is the chief cause of all defilements and the root cause of all *dukkha*, of all

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<sup>27</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 118.

<sup>28</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Mindfulness with Breathing*, 118-119.

<sup>29</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*.

disease...The mind that is free of clinging to ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is serene, filled full of truth-discerning awareness.”<sup>30</sup>

There are many methods for removing the disease of “I” and “mine”, taught Venerable Buddhādāsa. Some of the ways are to interrupt the process of dependent origination: cutting off the process at sense contact and not allowing feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction to arise, thus craving, clinging, and the feeling “I” and “mine” do not arise. Or else, stopping the process at feeling – let it simply remain as feeling and pass away, not allowing it to become craving. If there are cravings and desires based on satisfaction or dissatisfaction, then there is the spiritual disease of *dukkha*. “We try to have Dhamma right there at the meeting of eye and forms, of ear and sounds, of tongue and flavors, etc., by continually training in the point that nothing whatsoever should be clung to...We don’t just float along with the stream of ‘I’ and ‘mine’. In this way, there is never any *dukkha*.”<sup>31</sup> If we guard the senses properly, letting seeing just be seeing, hearing just be hearing, sensation just be sensation, thoughts just be natural phenomena arising in the mind, no “self” or “I” will arise, defilements will cease, and *dukkha* will end. One experiences the senses but does not let them enter and cause feeling, craving, and clinging to “I” and “mine” to arise. One who is empty of “I” acts without error, swiftly and beneficially; one who ends craving has real pleasure and real happiness.<sup>32</sup>

Another method given by Venerable Buddhādāsa is to see the sense objects as illusions, through understanding *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self) which can give security from disturbance: “We don’t become the slaves of sense-objects, laughing and crying according to their enticements. We are free, at rest, secure.” We use the tools of *anicca*, *dukkha*, *anatta* to see that sense objects are illusory (just like “I” and “mine” are illusions) and “the disease of *dukkha*” does not arise. Ajahn Buddhādāsa pointed out that we are often empty, unconfused and have awareness: “Disturbance, the feeling of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, comes every now and

<sup>30</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 14-15.

<sup>31</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 26-27.

again, and its periodic arising is called birth. Whenever there is birth there is dukkha. But there are also many moments when there is no birth and so no dukkha at all.” So, Buddhādāsa reiterated, “the mind is fundamentally empty...it’s already Nibbāna... the only thing that has to be watched for is not to let it be infiltrated by new things. So, don’t let them in. Drive them out!”<sup>33</sup> Practice Dhamma according to the Buddha’s teachings, have unceasing self-awareness, keep observing emptiness and disturbance, and be satisfied with emptiness – Nibbāna.

In summary, according to Venerable Buddhādāsa: “The ending of, or freedom from, the spiritual disease lies in knowing how to prevent the arising of ‘I’ and ‘mine’, and that freedom from disease is called the greatest gift.” He encouraged his listeners: “May you all thoroughly understand physical disease, mental disease, and spiritual disease. If you don’t allow your knowledge to be deficient in any way, then it can treat and cure all illness. Then you will be one who is free from disease and will really know the truth of the words, ‘True health is the greatest wealth’.”<sup>34</sup>

### **Venerable Ajahn Damrong**

Phra Ajahn Damrong is a healer and meditation master in the lineage of Ajahn Mun, currently residing in Korat, Thailand. Word of mouth brings numerous people with all varieties of ailments to his temple every day requesting treatment. Some of the afflictions that he and witnesses report that he has treated and healed include: paralysis, tumors, enlarged hearts, asthma, psoriasis, herniated discs, diabetes, Alzheimer’s, depression, bone misalignment, ulcers, and more. This researcher witnessed several treatment sessions in one day, with apparent positive outcomes and positive feedback from the patients. The cases included: an elderly man with difficulty walking (after 20 minutes of treatment he could walk quickly with ease); a young boy with asthma (after 15 minutes of treatment he was able to run around the temple grounds without asthmatic symptoms); a middle-aged woman with diabetes; a middle-aged woman with knee pain; a young

<sup>33</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 28-30.

<sup>34</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 33.

man with leg pain (after 5 minutes of treatment from a distance he reported the disappearance of all pain); and a young woman with persistent back pain (after 20 minutes of treatment she reported feeling energized and greatly relieved of pain). Phra Ajahn Damrong mentioned that treatments for serious problems have taken from 3 to 24 days, as every person and case is different.

Ajahn Damrong does not ask for any payment, but accepts donations, which he uses to purchase medical equipment, and he asks patients to practice meditation, do good deeds, and give up wrongdoing. He began healing, he related, because of feeling pity for people who spent great amounts of money on treatment without recovery, and because of the occurrence of some monks claiming to be healers, but not healing the patients, making people lose faith in Buddhism.

Phra Ajahn Damrong explained that he is able to see and understand people's illnesses through mental power (specifically the divine eye *abhiñña*, attained through *jhāna*). According to Ajahn Damrong, he can scan a person's body and their aura, checking the energy in their body parts and organs, seeing if they are bright or dark, and he can know a person's kamma, if they can be treated or not, and how long it will take to heal. While not all illnesses are due to kamma, of course, many cases are, and Phra Ajahn mentioned that he is able to ask permission from a person's *jao kam nai wen*<sup>35</sup> to treat an individual who has an illness due to kamma (provided that the person has a sense of conscience, intends to refrain from future wrongdoing, and so forth).

Using a wooden cane in a manner similar to a copper conductor, Venerable Damrong sends his power – a mixture of *prāṇa* and power of mind – into the person to help heal them. He explained that it is necessary for him to know the specific location of the disease is in the body – he cannot just randomly point. Therefore he studied anatomy and the organ systems of the body to be able to treat patients more effectively. Particularly, he uses his power, he said, to rearrange patients' molecular structure and put the molecules into proper order.

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<sup>35</sup> Kammic enemy; enemy from a past life; a being, often a spirit, with which one has done some bad kamma in the past and who seeks revenge for that kamma.

Ajahn Damrong pointed out that meditation helps improve the molecular arrangement in an individual's own body, and, with the power of mind gained from meditation practice, one can know their own bodies, rearrange their molecules, and even possibly make tumors shrink and disappear. In addition to the cane, Venerable Damrong employs medical equipment including a platform bed to gradually raise patients upright and a harness device secured along the ceiling to help patients recovering from paralysis learning to walk again.

Everyone has the potential to be able to heal others, according to Phra Ajahn Damrong, if they practice meditation regularly, for at least twenty years. For self-healing, with meditation practice people can learn to see inside their bodies, see their organs working, see if they are bright or dark, and make the organ system work well together. With meditation practice, Ajahn noted, one accumulates energy and can send this energy to others.

Venerable Damrong's primary meditation teaching is to make the breath long: One should close the eyes and try to make the breath long – breathe in long, breathe out long, feel the air in the respiratory system. Don't think about anything. Come back to the breath. Know the breath not with the brain but with the heart. All the time have mindfulness (*sati*), and keep the mind (*citta*) with the breath. (Beginners can breathe hard at first in order to feel it, then the breath will naturally become softer and eventually seem to disappear. One can also use the "buddho" method for some amount of time: thinking to oneself "bud" with the in-breath, "dho" with the out-breath.) After meditation, move slowly and open the eyes slowly, which keeps the mind collected.

Ethical behavior is of much significance as well, not just for spiritual practice, but for health, as the cases related by Ajahn Damrong reveal. He stressed that we should not hurt or kill any being, and injuring and disabling others is especially dangerous, because they have more time to harbor grudges and wish for revenge.<sup>36</sup> Many

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<sup>36</sup> In this connection, interestingly, the Cūḷakammavibhanga Sutta (M III 202) states that killing living beings and being cruel and merciless is a cause for a short lifespan in a future life, and injuring others intentionally is a cause for sickness in a future

illnesses may be due to a *jao kam nai wen* and the results of killing and injuring other beings in the past. Mental illnesses too, Damrong indicated, may be due either to physical causes, the molecules in the brain in poor arrangement, or to kamma and a *jao kam nai wen* disturbing brain waves.

The weight of kamma depends on both the intention and the amount that the other being suffers. Venerable Damrong gave an example of three fish: one you kill and eat right away – there is certainly an amount of wrong-doing but less than in the next two cases; the second fish you remove the skin from the fish while it's still alive and then kill and eat it – there is more time for it to suffer, so it is worse than the first case; and the third fish you leave out in the sun all day then kill and eat it later – since it has the most time to suffer and experience anger, the wrong-doing and weight of kamma is the greatest among the three cases. Phra Ajahn also mentioned that, for health, people should get back to nature and back to natural foods, eating “normal rice”, which can be digested properly by the body, rather than processed and enriched foods, which cannot be digested as well.

According to Phra Ajahn Damrong, if you practice meditation repeatedly, you can gain the power to heal yourself. Actually, the body always heals itself, Phra Ajahn pointed out, but if you practice more, you can heal more quickly, because you have greater inner power. Before you heal others, said Ajahn, you must heal yourself first.

## Comparison and Conclusion

Venerable Lee Dhammadharo, Venerable Buddhādāsa, and Venerable Damrong are unusual among meditation teachers in instructing practitioners to experiment with the breath and intentionally adjust the length of the breath, in order to enhance mental and physical health. This is quite contrary to what is often taught by many other

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life. Thus it is intentional harm and injury that is more directly related, kammically, to one's state of health than is intentional killing, which is related to lifespan, according to the text.



teachers – to let the breath simply be as it is normally, without interference. The methods they recommend are in fact forms of *prāṇayama*, a term used explicitly by Venerable Buddhādāsa and a practice not commonly associated with Buddhism, or Southeast Asian Buddhism in particular. An emphasis on health and healing is arguably not a well-known feature of Buddhism or Southeast Asian Buddhism in other parts of the world either. However, these three teachers clearly indicate that physical health and healing are in fact a significant part of the practice, and not just an incidental part or added benefit.

The teachers' instructions are all to some extent based on the steps of the *Ānāpānasati* and *Satipaṭṭhāna Suttas*, and they advise that when undertaken and understood for oneself, the practice is conducive to physical comfort, pain control, improved health, mental calm, and concentration. Far from mystical, divine, or miraculous healing, the principal method as presented by all three teachers is to observe and understand the breath, the body, the relationship between the two, and to use the breath – particularly long and comfortable breathing – to calm the body and effect improved health and healing. Therefore, their instructions are intended for practical use, as a guide for meditation practitioners to explore and experience breathing and the body for themselves, as well as to promote the healthy functioning of the body – without attachment or clinging to the body – in order to assist meditation and mental development.

As with most meditation teachers, there are differences in their instructions for breathing meditation. Both Ajahn Lee and Ajahn Damrong recommend the use of the “bud-dho” mantra with the breath, at least for some amount of time at or near the beginning of meditation practice, while Buddhādāsa Bhikkhu does not mention this technique in his instructions.

Ajahn Damrong advises that the eyes should be closed during meditation, while Ajahn Buddhādāsa stated that one should begin with the eyes open, with a soft gaze at the tip of the nose, not looking at anything else, and the eyes will eventually close on their own. Ajahn Lee indicated that the eyes should be closed, “but don't close your

eyes like a person asleep,” he said, “your optic nerves have to keep working to some extent or else you’ll get drowsy”.<sup>37</sup>

Ajahn Damrong highlights the connection between health and kamma, particularly the kamma of killing and injuring people and animals (who then presumably become *jao kam nai wen*). Ajahn Lee too mentioned that, as the body is sustained by food, which is often animals that have been killed to be eaten, he felt that the results of this kamma manifest as bodily afflictions:

The animals abused in this way are bound to curse and seek revenge against those who kill and eat them...After considering the diseases we suffer in our eyes, ears, nose, tongue, and throughout the various parts of the body, I concluded that we’ve probably been cursed by the animals we’ve eaten, because all of these parts come from the food we’ve made of their bodies. And so our body, cursed in this way, suffers pain...If we don’t let go of our attachments to the body, we’re bound to suffer for many lives to come.<sup>38</sup>

Similarly, the body passes away without nourishment, and its passing away may be due to past actions: “We’ve probably been harsh with other living beings, denying them food to the point where they’ve had to part with the bodies they feel such affection for. When the results of such actions reach fruition, our bodies will have to break up and disband in the same way,” according to Ajahn Lee.<sup>39</sup>

Venerable Buddhādāsa, on the other hand, seemed to de-emphasize kamma to some extent, in terms of its relevance to the goal of ending suffering in an ultimate sense. Buddhādāsa referred to a passage in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* which states that when the mind is empty of greed, aversion, delusion, and “I” and “mine”, kamma ends by itself. “We don’t have to be afraid of kamma,” said Buddhādāsa, “to fear that we must be ruled by our kamma. We don’t have to be interested in kamma. Rather, we should take an interest in emptiness.

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<sup>37</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, “Quiet Breathing”, *Food for Thought*.

<sup>38</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Craft of the Heart*, 42.

<sup>39</sup> Lee Dhammadharo, *Craft of the Heart*, 43

If we have created emptiness with regards to ‘I’ and ‘mine’, kamma will utterly disintegrate and there will be no way that we will have to follow its dictates.”<sup>40</sup> While not denying the truth of the law of kamma or the importance of morality and harmlessness, Venerable Buddhādāsa asserted that non-clinging and emptiness are the essential points to realize for the end of suffering and for true health, that is, spiritual health.

Phra Ajahn Lee instructed practitioners to pay homage to the Triple Gem, vow to keep the precepts, and extend *metta* (good will; loving-friendliness) and all four *brahma vihāras* to all beings before beginning meditation. Phra Ajahn Damrong however holds that *metta* should be extended to all beings after meditation practice, and Phra Ajahn Buddhadasa does not mention the *brahma vihāras* or homage to the Triple Gem in his meditation instructions.

Despite these differences, all three masters emphasize the importance of using the long breath in particular to calm the body and mind and to promote the health of the body and mind, through both the power of the breath itself and through the power of concentration and *jhāna* that mindfulness of the breath can bring about. As evidence of its importance, the long breath is the first subject of meditation in the Ānāpānasati and Satipatṭhāna Suttas as taught by the Buddha, and in Pāli language, *pāna* means breath as well as life. By understanding and utilizing the breathing in skillful ways, these three teachers all advocate, the health of the body can be improved, and physical health is a considerable asset for meditation, mental health, and spiritual practice.

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<sup>40</sup> Buddhādāsa, *Heart-wood from the Bo Tree*, 68.

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