

The Patience of a Hunter

January 2, 2020

The same instructions every day: Focus on your breath. Try to make the breath comfortable. Try to see what way of breathing feels good right now, just right for the body, just right for the mind. “Just right for the body” means that you’re not adding any unnecessary tension. And if the body feels tired, you breathe in a way that’s energizing. If it feels tense, you breathe in a way that’s relaxing. “Just right for the mind” means the kind of breathing that you can follow, stay alert, yet at the same time feel at ease.

One of the traditional images in the forest tradition is that you’re like a hunter. You’re hunting insights. Any hunter has to be alert and still at the same time. That’s the quality you’re trying to develop in the mind: still, so that you don’t scare the animals away; alert, so that you’re alert to the signs that an animal is approaching. And you have to be very patient. You can’t be sure that you’ll have your rabbit by four p.m., in time for dinner. The rabbit could come at any time, so you have to be prepared at any time. Otherwise, if you doze off, the rabbit will pass right in front of you and you won’t see it at all. If you’re letting your mind think about something else, not alert to the signs that rabbits tend to make, you’re going to miss a lot of rabbits.

It’s the same with the mind. You can *do* the concentration. This is why we give those instructions. But you can’t do insights. There’s no direct guarantee that if you focus in a certain way, the insights will have to come right away. But you can put your mind in a state where it’s ready to notice them when they do come. It’s still enough so that areas of the mind that normally get sloughed past or become a blur because you’re running around too much, suddenly become clear.

It’s like the difference between running past a tree and standing still, watching the tree. You see very different trees. If you run past, you see a blur. You may get a few details here and there. But if you’re asked afterwards, “What was in the tree?” you don’t know. But if you stand still and look very carefully—and make up your mind that you’re going to look for, say, the leaves or the birds or the squirrels—you begin to see the signs.

So you have to be still. But you also have to be intent. You have to have a purpose. What this means is that the patience you develop on the path—which is aided by your concentration, aided by your ability to stay with the breath with a sense of well-being, even when nothing else seems to be going on—has to have a purpose.

You're here to see how the mind is creating unnecessary suffering for itself, so you're trying to learn how to look for the signs of how it does that. And one of the signs is, as you get the mind still: Where is there a disturbance? How do you know there's a disturbance? When something goes up and down in the level of stress, either in the body or in the mind. When you notice an up and down like that, ask yourself, "What did you do that created more stress? What did you do the instant the stress went away? Is there a connection?" So you have to have some focus, and you have to have a purpose. And that way, your patience yields results.

The same principle applies outside. There are things you want to change in the environment around you. Some changes you can do at any time at all. Other changes depend on the people around you—what moods they're in, when they're ready to listen to you. And so when you're patient, it doesn't mean that you've given up, and it doesn't mean that you're lazy. You're simply waiting for the signs.

There are some rules for the monks that if you have an issue with somebody, before you accuse him of misbehavior, you have to ask yourself, "What is your motivation? How sure are you are you of what you saw or heard?" When you realize your motivation is for the well-being of that other person, and you're sure of what you saw, then you approach him.

In other words, you have to make sure your motivation is right. I know one monk who said he had to work with his mind for five years before he could finally bring himself to talk with another monk in line with all the Buddha's prescriptions. And it worked. The other monk had sensed the benevolent motivation behind the question, behind the accusation, and was very willing to change. Now, if the first monk hadn't waited, things might have blown up and nothing would have been accomplished.

So having a sense of time means, one, being very, very patient and, two, learning how to look for the signs. They don't jump out at you. You have to look for them. It's like looking for certain kinds of mushrooms in the forest. One, you have to learn how to recognize them, because some of them look like little holes in the carpet of leaves, just spaces between the leaves. And two, you have to want the mushroom. So it's a matter of recognizing and wanting at the same time.

The desire for things to change, the desire for things to be better than they are, is nothing to be ashamed of and nothing to do away with. It's simply something you have to train. Remember the Buddha's image of the path as being like the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope and then a sudden drop-off, just like the continental shelf off the east coast of the United States. And the gradual slope is the part where you're getting more and more familiar with the territory. It takes time. You have to be willing to take the time, to get more and

more sensitive. But the moment of true sensitivity, when your sensitivity has matured and meets right up with the issue you're looking for: That can change things very quickly.

What particular defilement is there in the mind? Which of the voices of the committee of the mind is running things without your realizing it? Just keep those thoughts in the back of your mind. That's what you're looking for. Otherwise, the signs can go right past you and you don't see anything because they are going right past you all the time anyhow. Simply getting the mind still enough to see them and also learning how to recognize them and wanting to see them, making that your focus: That's how you'll know they're there.

This is why the questions that we ask ourselves in the practice center on a very few topics: "Where's the stress? What's causing it?" The Buddha gives you some idea of the terrain, what kinds of questions to ask. But you want to keep the focus narrow. Otherwise, you're looking for too many things all at once, and you end up not seeing any of them.

I received a letter one time from a monk who said he had a 165 questions for me. He was going to be nice enough to let me answer them in little batches at a time. And I wrote back to him, saying, "I can't believe anybody seriously has that many questions bothering him. What are the questions that are really alive for you? What are the important ones?" He took umbrage and that was the end of the conversation. He thought I was making fun of him. But my point was serious. If you're asking too many questions, wanting too many things, it's very unlikely that you're going to see what's important, to see the signs for when is the right time to want a particular thing to happen, and what are the signs that that particular insight is about to come.

So try to narrow things down. What do you really want out of your meditation? The Buddha recommends that you ask yourself one big question: "What am I doing that's causing unnecessary stress and suffering?" And the *doing* here may be very subtle things, like perceptions. We tend to think of the reality we sense through the senses as a given. But you have to realize there's so much that's based on the labels you put on things, and the labels can be accurate for what they're worth, but they can actually be a problem. After all, there's no label that's going to be 100% in line with the way things are. The labels we create are good enough to get by, good enough to get use out of the body, good enough to get use out of the mind. But they can have their drawbacks.

For instance, with pain in the body, there may be a label in the mind that says: "This pain has invaded my body, and it has a certain shape, it has a certain color, it has a certain texture, it has a certain intention." Some of these things go under the

radar. But the label is already there, and you have to keep applying it again and again and again. So you want to catch the mind as it's applying those labels, because a lot of them are causing you trouble totally unnecessarily. So look for the labels.

That's one of the big issues. Looking at the teachings of the forest ajaans, you see that they keep coming back to this issue again and again and again: the issue of perception, the perception that adds unnecessary stress, unnecessary suffering—the perception by which you understand things and the understanding that could be perfectly okay as far as daily life goes, but when you're sitting here trying to be aware of the body and the mind right now, the perception may be part of the problem, part of the stress that you're adding.

So you want to get the mind still enough to see these things, and also give the mind a purpose. We're not here just simply to watch whatever comes and goes and be okay with that. We're here to see: What is the mind doing that's creating the trouble? Every now and then, these things will show themselves if you're patient. When you stay with the breath with a sense of well-being, you're putting yourself in a position where you can see them. Now, you can't guarantee that you'll see them today or tomorrow. That's the gradual part.

As long as you've got yourself in the right place with the right intention and ask the right questions, then there will have to come a point where things open up and you say, "Oh, it's been happening all along. And I half knew it, but I didn't really know it, and now I see it clearly. This is the problem, and I'm creating the problem when I don't have to." At that point, you don't have to think about inconstancy, stress, or not-self or dependent co-arising or emptiness or any of the big teachings. You're focused on something you can see right here, right now, that's been right here, right now. You've been looking past it, but now you see.

That's what this is all about. When you solve this problem, you find it's like pulling a thread out of a stocking. The whole weave begins to collapse. That's the sudden part of the path.

So focus on being patient, but don't think that you're giving in by being patient. You're being wise. Prudent. These things will show themselves when the conditions are right, and you're trying to refine the conditions bit by bit by bit. There *will* come a point when, with just a slight action or a slight insight, things open up in a very unexpected way. That's when your patience pays off. You've got the rabbit.

So don't tell yourself you don't want the rabbit. And don't pretend that you don't want the rabbit. There has to be desire in the practice. It's simply a matter of

learning how to focus your desires, paring them down so that you're not looking for too many things, and then just look very carefully for the tell-tale signs.