

Tenacity

February 23, 2021

One of the customs of the forest tradition is that when you're out staying in the woods and the time comes to pitch your tent or to hang your tent from a cord stretched between two trees, you check the ground first. Look all around. Make sure there are no ant nests, no rocks that are going to be uncomfortable. Smooth things out. It's the place where you're going to meditate; it's the place where you're going to lie down and sleep. You make a vow: Once you've set up the tent, you're not going to move it. So, you look very carefully before you set things up and make your final decision.

In the same way, when you start your meditation, you've got to check things out in the body. This is the place where the mind is going to settle down. Your awareness is going to fill the body. You're going to inhabit the body. So, make sure it's a good place to be.

Breathe through the different parts of the body. Get to know them well. Clear out any problems you might have: tension here, tension there. If you know you have a tendency to block certain areas of the body, do what you can to unblock them. Take some time to do this. Do it well. Now, sometimes, it's like camping in a difficult spot. You find yourself in a rocky place or a narrow ledge on a mountain. There's not much space to be choosy about where you're going to sit, where you're going to lie down, where you're going to pitch your tent. So, you do your best, and then make do.

In the same way, there will be times when there are pains in the body. You can't do much about them. But you can learn how to work around them. If you do have the choice, do your best, because you want the mind to be able to settle in and not have to suddenly discover that there's a rock right under your foot, or a tree root some place sticking into your chest. Once you've made all the adjustments, you want to settle in and just learn how to stay. Develop a kind of tenacity to the meditation where you really hold on to one object all the way through.

There's a tendency when you're working with the breath for the mind to have its pauses and its phrases, you might call them—the way music is phrased. The breath comes in, the breath goes out: That's one breath. Then it comes in, goes out: That's the second breath. But you treat them like separate phrases. You move from one phrase to the next, to the next, and there'll be a little break in between each phrase. That's better than shifting away from the breath and going to other things. But still, it's not as continuous, not as strong as when you really hold on.

This is one of the reasons why Ajaan Lee recommends that when you work through the different breath energy channels in the body, you've got everything all connected, you find a spot where you stay focused. You hold on to that spot. You have a perception about it, which may be just a feeling in that spot. Or you may have a mental image. You hold on to that, and you resist the temptation to drop it in between the breaths. You get so that the out-breath goes into the in-breath, and the in-breath goes into the out-breath. It's all one element. And you can really stay there.

So, prepare a place where you can sit down and stay for a long period of time with as much ease as you can manage, because we're here to see things in the mind, and the best way to see subtle things in the mind is to be as still as possible, so that the slightest disturbance, the slightest movement, will be clear.

You can make another comparison. It's like listening to a piece of music far away. You have to make yourself very, very quiet, so that the sound of your body doesn't get in the way of the sound of the music; the sound of your thoughts doesn't get in the way of the sound of the music. You want everything to be as quiet as possible so that you can hear the subtleties, because there will be good things arising in the mind, and not so good things arising in the mind. It's best to catch them when they're new, when they're just small.

Like a fire: When a fire gets started, if it's just a tiny flame, you can put it out very easily. If you wait until it spreads, burns a couple acres, then it's out of control, and you have to wait until it dies out on its own. Or if you're going to put it out, it takes a lot of effort. So, get it when it's right there, just one tiny little flame: a little bit of sensual desire, a little bit of ill will, a little bit of sleepiness. Catch them when they're small.

As for the good things that arise, we've all read the different stages of jhana you can go through. Especially as you're first exploring them, it's not the case that you'll clearly go from one and then into the next with a clean break. What happens, say, with the directed thought and evaluation, is that you think about the breath, and you evaluate it for a bit, and then you watch. You make a few adjustments, and then you watch. Then there's just the watching for a while. Then it's not quite right again, though, so you evaluate it some more. But there will be pauses between the evaluations. After a while, you realize you can stay in the pauses. You don't need to evaluate things again. Everything is just right.

It's the same as when you go from the second to the third jhana. There's ease and rapture in the second, and just ease or pleasure in the third. The movements of rapture will come in waves, and then they'll go away for a bit. Then they'll come back again. After a while you begin to realize it's actually more pleasant when the waves have gone. You're not riding them. So, you focus in on the level of energy that's free of the waves of rapture.

You'll notice this if you're really continuous in your focus. You begin to see even with the continuous focus, that there will occasionally be a little bit of evaluation around it to make sure it's going okay. It's that little bit of evaluation that will notice the little things. Other times, you turn that off and you're just there with the focus drilling into that spot, along with the sense of the whole body. You don't want to lose that whole-body sense. Just have that one point where you're really, really focused.

It's like looking at a painting. Say it's a painting of a person: You can focus on the eyes or on the background. That doesn't mean you don't see the rest of the painting. It's there. It's just that you bring a couple of details into sharp focus. And it's the same here. You don't want to totally block out your awareness of the rest of the body. In fact, whatever sense of stillness there is in the point of your focus, you want to think of that radiating out from that spot so that it fills the whole body. The stillness spreads just in the way you had spread the breath before.

Ajaan Lee makes this observation. In the beginning, you're chasing the breath through the body, and there will be a sense of the energy flowing through the blood vessels and the nerves as you breathe in, as you breathe out. But when you've got your point of stillness in the midst of the breath, you begin to realize: There are other parts of stillness in the body, other areas of stillness as well. You can connect them up. You focus in on that stillness, and perceive it as a still breath, and not just a part of the body that's not breathing—it's just a different kind of breath, a different kind of energy: That's when your foundation gets really large.

But there's still that sense of tenacity in your main point of focus, in your ability to stick with this one sensation through time. As the breath goes in, as the breath goes out, you're still here with this stillness. You can stay here because you've prepared the place. You've prepared your sitting cloth, your sleeping cloth, this spot where you're putting your tent. You did all the preliminary work. Now you can enjoy the fruits of your labors, as you teach the mind to be really tenacious and really still.

Then you can learn how to adjust the quality of your focus so that it's just right. You're not putting too much pressure on any part of the body at all, even your main focal point. You have to learn what's the right amount of pressure to stay, without interfering with the flow of the breath. You're working for a just-right concentration, beginning with the beginning steps: choosing your spot, cleaning things out, getting rid of any disturbances all the way through. This state of mind is your food in the meditation, food in the practice. When the mind is well fed like this, then it's willing to start understanding itself and stop hiding things from itself. It's a mind well rested and ready for work.