

Forest Bathing

November 3, 2022

We were talking this evening about the custom of forest bathing. The Buddha was a very early forest bather. I'm serious. He actually gives instructions in how to do it. You go out in the forest, he says, and once you're in the wilderness, you stop and think, "All the concerns of household life, all the concerns of family, are not here right now. You're surrounded by wilderness." Appreciate that fact. You don't have to carry your home. You don't have to carry your family. You don't have to carry your work here. Leave it out there. Of course, saying just that much indicates the difference between wilderness now and wilderness then.

Back then, wilderness was an ocean of land, and civilization was an archipelago of islands of human settlement. Wilderness had the upper hand. Nowadays, wilderness is just little pockets here and there—like the pocket we have here, surrounded by the forest, surrounded by the rise of the land. We have our island of wilderness here. So bring your mind here. Have the perception of wilderness, and allow the concerns of home life to become small. And appreciate the lack of those concerns.

It's a kind of emptiness. As the Buddha said, you notice what's present and you notice what's gone in terms of disturbance. You appreciate whatever emptiness, whatever lack of disturbance there is. That's one of the original meanings of emptiness: the extent to which the mind is empty of disturbance. Meditation is a process of gradually making it more and more empty, more and more free of disturbance.

So what are the disturbances still there in the wilderness? Well, there are animals and there are what they call non-human beings, beings you can't see. That can be a disturbing thought. You don't know who they are. You don't know their intentions. So the next step is to spread lots of goodwill.

There's a passage in the Canon where a monk has been bitten by a snake and he dies. Other monks go and report this to the Buddha, and the Buddha says, "That's because he never suffused the four families of snakes with his goodwill." This then became a chant that has been repeated ever since then. "I have goodwill for all snakes, goodwill for beings without feet, beings with two feet, beings with four feet, beings with many feet. May none of those beings—with no feet, two feet, four feet, many feet—do me any harm." Then you think about how the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha are unlimited, whereas there is a limit to creeping things. There's a limit even to devas and spirits.

That thought gives you something larger to hold on to. What are you holding on to when you hold on to the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha? You hold on to their example of how happiness is found, how danger is avoided—because the Buddha’s teachings really are motivated by a very sharp sense of danger.

But the real dangers that the Buddha points out are not the dangers outside. It’s not what other people or other beings can do to you. It’s what your mind can do to itself—what your greed, aversion and delusion can do to you. The causes of suffering, as the Buddha said, come from within. We tend to focus on the pains and hardships that come from people outside, situations outside, the climate, the economy. But as Ajaan Lee once said, “Those are the shadows of real suffering. The real suffering is in the clinging.” Of course, the source of clinging is in the craving.

These dangers come from within. So when you take the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as your examples, you’re thinking of their instructions on how to save yourself from these inner dangers. Those instructions come down basically to virtue, concentration, discernment, all based on a principle of generosity. So, stop for a while and think about what that means. Happiness is found through generosity and then perfected through virtue, concentration, and discernment. This is why we meditate. This is how we escape danger.

A forest is a good place to do this because as you let go of your concerns about the world outside, it becomes easier and easier in a place like this to allow the mind to settle down to a point where it can see itself more clearly. It’s worth noting that the oldest wilderness poetry we have comes in the Pali Canon. While there was nature poetry before that, the nature was the nature of farmlands and domesticated places. Whereas poetry that really appreciates the wildness of nature as being an ideal place to train the mind: That was something new with the Pali Canon.

Even Ven. Maha Kassapa, who was probably the sternest of all the Buddha’s disciples, has a very long poem on the Buddhist attitude toward the wilderness, which is that it’s a refreshing place to be because you’re far from other concerns. Here you can put aside your fear of nature, realizing that the real dangers lie inside. Then you can focus on dealing with those inside dangers. And the guide for dealing with those dangers is the four noble truths.

We often hear that we’re here to see things as they are largely in terms of the three characteristics. But the Buddha never taught that. The three characteristics, he said, are subordinate to the four noble truths. We’re here to understand our craving. We’re here to understand our clinging. We’re here to follow the path. The insight we’re after is not so much seeing things as they *are* as it is seeing things as they actually *function*. How does the mind create

dangers for itself? How does it create suffering for itself? You want to get the mind really still so that it can see these patterns of behavior in action.

So you focus on the breath, focus on any part of the body that you find easy to stay focused on. There's also the meditation on the thirty-two parts of the body. And although in some passages it emphasizes the unclean nature of those parts of the body to counteract lust and to counteract pride—lust for other people's bodies, pride in your own body—it's also good for the sake of concentration to keep in mind what you've got here. It can be very calming just to think, "I've got bones. No matter what happens in the world outside, the bones are still there. I've got this organ. I've got that organ."

You can think about all the concerns you have about the comfort of the body, the health of the body, how your metabolism is going, how easy it is to pick up disease, and all the things you do to protect the body. But what is the body? It's just these organs. You want to make sure that they don't take over. They should be seen as things that you can use for the purpose of doing good—and they're really useful that way. The Buddha never says that the body's bad. Just that there's a healthy way of looking at the body and an unhealthy way of looking at the body. You could have a healthy negative image or a unhealthy negative image of the body. Or an healthy positive image and an unhealthy positive image.

An unhealthy negative image is seeing that other people's bodies are beautiful and yours is not. A healthy negative image is seeing that we're all equal in terms of what we have inside the body. There would be no point in comparing our livers: Who has the most beautiful liver? Who has the most beautiful lungs? Who cares? It's best to see that the body in and of itself is not all that much.

But it is useful as a tool. This is where the healthy positive image comes in. Think of all the good things you can do with the body. You can practice generosity. You can practice virtue. You can sit here and meditate. You can focus on the breath. You can focus on any part of the body.

An unhealthy positive image would be to say, "My body is beautiful. I can use this beautiful body to get other people to do what I want." That just leads to more dangers.

So, the danger isn't with the body. It's with the attitude. So use the body as a tool to get the mind to settle down so that you can focus on the real dangers. They're not the dangers of the civilized world. They're not the dangers of the forest. They're dangers inside, around clinging and craving. You want to see how these things arise.

What the Buddha has to say about suffering is really counterintuitive. When we think about suffering, we just think about pain. The Buddha says No: Suffering is clinging. The part that's hard to bear is the clinging, yet we run

to cling to things. The cause of suffering is the craving, and yet we keep taking our cravings as our friend.

This is another useful part of forest bathing: to see through that imagined friendship. What the Buddha calls physical seclusion is when you get away from other people. But that's not enough. Even then, he says, you tend to go around with your cravings as your friends, your companions. Whatever they whisper into your ears, you go with it. And if, for some reason, you can't go with it, you feel frustrated. The Buddha's basically saying, "Hey, look, you've got a false friend: the sort of person who gets you to do something against the law, and then, when the police come, runs away and leaves you holding the evidence." Craving doesn't suffer, but it makes you suffer. Yet you treat it as a friend. You've got to look into that. Why is that? You don't see how things function.

How does craving arise? The Buddha gives a list of factors. Craving builds on feeling. Feeling comes from contact, contact from having the six senses. The six senses come from name and form. The list chases things down through the processes of fabrication – *sankhara*. There basically are three types. There's bodily fabrication, which is your in-and-out breath; verbal fabrication, directed thought and evaluation, the way you focus your mind on a topic and then make comments about it, ask questions about it—basically, the way you talk to yourself. And then mental fabrication: feelings and perceptions. Perceptions are the labels you put on things. You identify this as this and that as that. Sometimes your perceptions are accurate; sometimes they're not. Sometimes even when they're accurate, they lead to more greed, aversion, and delusion.

What we're trying to find are perceptions that are actually accurate and conducive to getting the mind past suffering, to see through its cravings and clings.

So the Buddha's approach is not start by trying to stop fabricating things in these ways. It's to learn how to fabricate these things with knowledge. This is why we focus on the breath, bodily fabrication. You direct your thoughts to the breath; you evaluate the breath. You use certain perceptions of the body: about how the breath enters the body, where the breath originates in the body, what levels of breathing there are in the body.

Sometimes you'll find that as you're beginning to breathe in, and you're intentionally making the breath do this or that, the breath has actually already moved through the body on its own. You want to detect that to see how that really quick breath can be used.

You consciously put together a state of concentration as a way of studying these fabrications so that you can fabricate these things with knowledge. And doing them with knowledge creates the path. As you get hands-on practice with states of concentration, you can take the insights you've learned about

how you breathe, how you talk to yourself, the perceptions and feelings you hold in mind, and how they actually shape things in the rest of your life, and you can catch yourself doing these things in daily life in ways that are unskillful. You realize that you don't have to do it in those ways.

This kind of knowledge, the knowledge of things as they function, is what our forest bathing is for. We benefit from the peace and calm around us, all the green of the trees, the natural quality of nature, so that we can focus inside. Nature is here as a backdrop and, as the Buddha said, it does have its dangers, but you realize that the dangers inside are the really serious ones.

There's a famous story in the forest tradition. Ajaan Khao was living in a cave for a while. He didn't realize that there was a tiger living deeper in the cave. It just so happened that when Ajaan Khao was away from the cave, that would be the time when the tiger would enter the cave and leave the cave—until one night he was doing walking meditation. It was a bright moonlit night, so he was doing walking meditation at the mouth of the cave, and the tiger came along.

As soon as Ajaan Khao saw the tiger, he was frozen with fear. But then he realized, which is more dangerous? The fear or the tiger? He decided the fear was more dangerous. So he watched the fear in his mind, and got deep into concentration as the fear fell away. He just stood there in concentration. He came out, and the moon had moved quite a bit. He must have been in concentration for a couple of hours. The tiger was gone. As a result of this experience, Ajaan Khao learned an important lesson about fear: what the fear came from, why it was there.

That's called following the duties of the four noble truths. He gained a sense of how things function: how states of fear, states of anxiety, states of whatever are put together in the mind. They're fabricated out of these three kinds of fabrication. The questions you should ask are: How are you talking to yourself? What are the perceptions you're holding in mind? Learning how to breathe calmly as you do this provides you with a safe place so that you can delve deeper into the mind.

That's the whole purpose of forest bathing: to get you focused inside where the real dangers are, because the world of the human race is a very distracting world. It keeps telling you that what other people are doing someplace else is more important than what you're doing right now, whereas when you come out and bathe in the forest for a while, you realize that what you're doing right now is the most important thing you've got to take care of. It's a problem if you're creating suffering for yourself. Nobody else can solve that problem for you.

But you have the tools that allow you to do it yourself: the tools you get from the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. This is why it's the most important

thing to focus on, because it's the genuine problem and it can be solved. As the Buddha pointed out, once this problem is solved, then there's nothing else that can weigh on the mind.

Ajaan Suwat was once sitting in the sala at Wat Metta. He pointed to Mount Palomar, which is across the large valley there, and asked some of the lay people, "Is that mountain heavy?" Now, you know when an ajaan asks a question like that, it's a trick question. Nobody dared to answer. So he provided the answer himself. He said, "If you pick it up, it's heavy on you. But if you don't pick it up, even though it's heavy in and of itself, it's not heavy on you. That's what matters." In the same way, the disturbances of the world, if you pick them up, are going to keep the mind stirred up. When you can learn how to put them down and then learn how to put down the disturbances inside the mind, then you're bathed.

This kind of bathing is an image that occurs many times in the Canon.

There was a lay person listening to a Dhamma talk by the Buddha one time. He gained stream entry while he was listening. His servant came up to him toward the end of the talk and said to him, "Now's the time to go home and take your bath." The master said, "I've already been bathed by the Dhamma." Of course, in a culture like India, where they had ritual bathing, the Buddha appropriated that image as well. Those who are truly pure, truly bathed, he said, are those whose minds have no more clinging, no more craving.

It's this inner bath that's most important. But the outer bath of the forest provides the ideal location, the ideal environment, so that you can focus on where the real problem is and bathe it away.