

Stake Out

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Meditating is like trying to catch a criminal, someone who's been creating a lot of trouble: stealing things, killing things, killing people. You have an idea of where the criminal is hiding, but you want to catch the criminal in action. So think of when police stake out a joint. They have to get someone who's there all the time, to watch the criminal come and go, and expect that they won't see much. There'll be long periods when nothing happens, and they have to learn how not to get bored and inattentive, because sometimes the criminal can slip in, slip out very quickly.

In the same way, you're trying to watch the mind to see where your defilements come from, how they slip out. Even though you're trying your best not to let the defilements come out, they come out as they want to. And they slip back. All too often you're not aware of them until they're really full-blown. By that time, it's really hard to deal with them and to understand them. How is it that the mind shapes these things? It's not totally through the influence of past actions. Past actions have a role to play, of course, but there's also your present-moment complicity. Got to watch out for that.

So if you're a policeman staking out a joint, one, you have to be very quiet, and not get bored by the quiet. In fact, boredom is one of the first things you've got to learn how to deal with. It seems strange that we try so hard to get the mind to settle down, and then once it's there, we say, "Okay, what's next?" That voice that says, "What's next?" has to be answered with, "This is what's next. We're going to settle in here." One of the reasons why we work with the breath is to give us something to do, partly so that we can settle in comfortably, and also so that we can have a few skills up our sleeve. That way, when thoughts do begin to appear, you're sensitive to them not only on the mental side but also on the physical side, because there's a physical side to each thought.

It's one of the reasons why people whose work involves a lot of thinking can be so tired at the end of the day. I was reading a Chinese medical text one time saying that mental work takes three times as much out of your body as physical labor.

So we focus on the breath and the breath energies in the body. As the Buddha says, you want to be aware of the entire body.

Some people are going to interpret that as being entirely aware of the whole length of the breath, in which case they say that the word "body" there means the body of the breath as felt at the nostrils. Well, the body of the breath is not just

the length of the breath at one spot in the body. It's the whole body, because the whole body is breathing.

In fact, that's a good perception to hold in mind: that every cell in your body is breathing in, breathing out, and everybody is breathing together. See what happens when you hold that perception in mind. You can get more and more familiar to subtle breath energies in the body and where the energy is blocked. Learn which blockages you can work through easily, and which ones are more resistant.

The resistant ones often are very tender, sensitive parts of your body-mind complex. You've forced them into a little pod of tension, so they don't trust you. One of the ways you learn to get them to open up is to be very gentle with them and not go directly at them. Work around them and content yourself for the time being with the fact that you can make other parts of the body comfortable.

Ajaan Lee's image is of going into a house where the floorboards have some rotten spots. You accept that fact. Just make sure you don't lie down in the rotten spots. There's plenty of room in the house where you can lie down where the floorboards are solid and sound.

At the same time, in the course of working through these energies, you get more sensitive to how things form. The formation of a thought has both a physical side and a mental side, and the breath is the ideal place to see this. After all, it is a physical property, but of the physical properties, it's closest to the mind the most sensitive what's going on in the mind. So when a thought comes up, you see that it reverberates both in the body and in the mind. You make up your mind that you're not going to, as they say in Thai, weave or continue the weave of the thought.

As soon as a thought has appeared, you zap it. In other words, you take that skill you have of breathing through patterns of tension, and use it wherever you sense any tension around the thought. You don't have to even think of whether it's physical or mental tension at that point. But there's an act of construction, an act of fabrication, beginning to put things together, and there's going to be some tension, there's going to be some stress there: Breathe right through it. Then wait and be quiet for a while. Something else will begin to form, and you zap that. There will be a part of the mind says, "Well, this is getting boring," or "This is kind of dumb. You're not thinking about anything." Well, zap that one, too. And try and catch these things as quickly as you can.

Think about the Buddha's analysis of why we suffer. It's because of craving, and there're three kinds of craving. There's craving for sensuality, which in this case, means just nice sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations to think about.

A lot of our thinking goes there. And a lot of our sense of becoming goes around the pleasures that we'd like to get in that way. So that leads to the second kind of craving, which is craving for becoming: having a sense of you in a world of experience. Then there's craving for non-becoming. You have a sense of you in a world of experience and you don't like it. You'd be really happy to see it end. You do what you can to put an end to it. But, as the Buddha said, simply having that desire, you're taking on an identity in another world, the world that sees this first world being destroyed.

So that's the dilemma. You try to end states of becoming by wiping them out, and you just create more states of becoming, more craving for becoming. So what do you do? As the Buddha says, you try to see things as they have come to be, *yatha-bhuta ñana-dassana*, knowledge and vision of things as they've come to be. Which basically means seeing the steps that lead up to the creation of that sense of you in that world of experience.

This is what dependent co-arising is all about. The most interesting factors in dependent co-arising are the ones that come prior to sensory contact: intention, attention, perception, feeling, directed thought, evaluation, and even the way you breathe.

If you take these things simply as events in and of themselves, you begin to see there's not much there. That's the level that the Buddha wants you to operate on, before these things have a chance to become a state of becoming, because as you get a sense of dispassion for them, it aborts any states of becoming that would come from them. As for the states of becoming already there, they're going to end at some point on their own anyhow.

This is how you work your way through that dilemma, but it requires that you catch these thought patterns or the activity of thinking as quickly as you can. Zap each one as quickly as you can so that you can get it down to these raw materials. Then you can start dealing with the part of the mind that objects. It says, "Hey, using these raw materials to create a state of becoming, that's actually kind of fun." And yes, there are times when you do get some pleasure out of it, but you have to keep thinking about all the suffering that goes with becoming as well.

This is why it's good to keep the Buddha's awakening in mind. That's one of those events that it's always good to keep coming back to. There are some events that have happened in the world that have affected the state of the world for a while, but the Buddha's awakening has made the most radical long-term change in our sense of possibilities here in the world. Part of that comes from the perspective he had through his first two knowledges: seeing all the times he died, had been reborn, and died again and had been reborn again. Pleasure, pain,

feeding, dying; pleasure, pain, feeding, dying over and over and over again. When you think about that, it helps give you a sense of *samvega*. You begin to look at this process of becoming with a more jaundiced eye—that, and all the dialogues and narratives and monologues that you have around it, that clutter up your mind.

The way to deal with those is, on the one hand, to try to replace the wrong views lying behind those monologues with right view. Then, on the other hand, learn how to take apart the process of thinking, so that you can see how arbitrary the whole thing is, how insubstantial it is. And there's all the suffering we can create out of insubstantial things. We tend to be proud of the fact that we can create all kinds of states of becoming, to get the things that we decided that we want, out of almost nothing. But then when you begin to realize: There's a lot of suffering that you're creating out of nothing, and the suffering is real.

I was listening to someone recently talking about how he was in dialog with a monk who had been studying some Mahayana texts. At first he felt really offended by those texts, because they were saying suffering isn't real. Suffering doesn't exist, the cause doesn't exist, the path doesn't exist. He thought, "Well, holding on to these views that we say are right is making me suffer, so maybe I should let go of them."

That's the wrong attitude. As the Buddha said, suffering is real. It's not other than what it seems. Craving really is the cause of suffering. The end of craving really does put an end to suffering. And this path that we're following really does work. That level of right view is something you should hang on to, because it points your efforts in the right direction. When you don't need it any more, then you can let it go. But as long as you're suffering, you still need it.

So try to inform your meditation with right view. These processes of creating thoughts do have a lot of potential for suffering, and you want to learn how to take them apart. Now, there will come times, of course, when you have to think. Look at the Buddha. He thought quite a lot. All those suttas, all those teachings he gave: It's not that he was on automatic pilot. He was thinking, but by that point he had learned how to think. As he said, he thought the thoughts he wanted to think and he didn't have to think the thoughts he didn't want to think. Yet he had a very clear set of values as to what was worth thinking and what was not worth thinking.

So to develop that same skill, we first have to learn how to not think, or how to de-think our thinking. It requires some thinking to do that. But make sure it's all thinking in line with right view. Any thinking that goes off into wrong view, you've got to zap. And a good part of right view is knowing when you don't have

to hold on to what you've remembered about right view. You pick it up when you need it as a tool and then you put it down.

It's like going into the kitchen. You'll have lots of different utensils, all kinds of spoons and spatulas and pans and pots and things. You know you're going to have to use them all in the course of the day, but you don't carry them all around with you all the time. They have their places. You pick them up when you need them and you put them back down when you don't. That way, you're not weighed down.

Think of right view in that way. It's a whole series of utensils. All the factors of the path are different series of utensils, and your mindfulness is there to remind you that you have these things on hand if you need them. You just want to get the mind into stillness, and then you can put them down. All you have to remember is to stay still, right here. Be ready to zap any thought that comes up as quickly as you can. That's not too much to keep in mind. And learn how to enjoy that. As the Buddha said, if you take delight in developing and delight in abandoning, that does an awful lot to keep you on the path.

So as you're staking out the lair of this criminal, you don't have to suffer. You watch, you wait, and the criminal is bound to show his stripes. He's actually been showing his stripes all along, but you haven't seen the stripes because you've been looking other places. Your mind's been drifting off. When you get firmly established with your vantage point here and can take some delight in stepping back from all the different identities and dialogues and monologues that have been going on in your mind, you can tell yourself, "I don't have to participate in those things anymore."

When you can pull yourself out of a particularly sticky one, there should be a sense of accomplishment, and that should nourish you, keep you going.

So you can take this as your sport. You can catch the criminal in action. See where he's guilty and get him sentenced. Then you can live in peace.