

Fire

May 15, 2014

Danger is outside; danger is inside. Fire is outside; fire is inside. Where are you going to go? Well, fortunately, not everything inside is on fire. Try to find a spot right now where there's a sense of stillness in the mind, and do your best to nourish that because, whatever the dangers, what you'll need to face those dangers will be the quality you build into your mind.

When dangers come, you have to think quickly. You can prepare and prepare and prepare and get all your ducks in order, and then you find out that the problem facing you has nothing to do with ducks at all. The ducks may actually become a problem themselves. But if you're alert and mindful, if you're concentrated and discerning, then you're much more likely to be able to handle whatever problem comes up. So the best way to deal with the potential for danger is to strengthen the mind. And here you are, meditating. You're doing precisely the thing that's going to help you, whatever the danger is.

This afternoon, we had what turned out to be a false alarm about an evacuation – at least for today. But even when those kinds of alarms are false, there's always the potential for aging, illness, and death, for separation from those we love. This can happen at any time, so you want to be prepared at any time. So you work on these qualities. Each time your mind wanders off from the breath, try to remember, "Where am I supposed to be?" You're alert to the fact that you've wandered off, and you come right back.

That's the ardency that develops these qualities. Ardency is very directly related to right effort. And effort here doesn't mean just brute effort. What makes it right is that it's discerning, noticing what kind of effort is needed right now, how much effort, and also how to motivate yourself. This is a large part of the practice, keeping the motivation going. So you notice how much you need to remind yourself of danger in order to keep yourself on top of the practice, and at what point it gets too much. In other words, at what point do you get distracted by the sense of danger and begin to lose composure? You want the right combination here of heedfulness and confidence. Then work on the necessary skills – like right now, as you're working on the breath.

There are different ways you can work with the breath. You can consciously tell yourself, "Okay, now I'm going to lengthen the breath," – or "shorten the breath" and see how the body reacts. See how the mind reacts. And how about the quality of how heavy or light the breath is, how fast, slow, deep, shallow? You can consciously experiment with these things, too. Or you can immediately go and start working with the breath energies that are more subtle, that permeate the nervous system in the body. And although the in-and-out breath may be more obvious, there are times when you find that approaching everything from the breath energies works better.

Just try to notice: Is there any part of the body that doesn't seem to be there in your awareness? Trace through things. Start with your fingers and go up your arms to the shoulders. See where the shoulders connect to the neck. Then go down to start with the toes and work up through the feet, your shins, knees, thighs, hips, up the back. Any parts of the body missing? Any places you feel a sense of space where there should be a sense of the body? Well, see if you can connect things together.

Say that your shoulder feels like it's missing. Okay, trace things down from the neck through the shoulder to the arm. Or notice where you feel the neck and where you feel the part of the arm that *is* present to your awareness. Ask yourself, "What's connecting here?" And you may find that your shoulder may not be dislocated in the sense of the joint being out of whack, but your sense of where your shoulder is, is not in line with the rest of the body. Okay, imagine it coming back in line. Think of things connecting where they should be. And as you're working with connecting the breath energies up, the in-and-out breath is going to find its right rhythm.

So that's another way of approaching things. This is especially useful when you find that you're over-controlling the in-and-out breath, and it becomes a chore to think about breathing in and breathing out. You can just be with a sense of connection of breath energies in the body: connected while you're breathing in, connected while you're breathing out. The in-and-out doesn't have to make any difference. That allows the mind to settle down with something that's more solid, more continuous. In fact, the more connected everything is inside, the easier it is to settle down into deeper and deeper levels of concentration. The breath gets more subtle; the mind, more secure.

Then when things really are connected, all you have to do is to focus on one spot and develop a feeling of connectedness throughout the whole body. You don't have to keep tracing things here, tracing things there. You're just present in one spot, and the awareness spreads from that spot. Ajaan Lee's image is of cutting a whole series of roads through a forest and then running electric wires along the roads. As soon as you plug in the wire, the whole forest is lit up.

Nowadays we don't like the idea of running routes through forests. He was talking at a time when the forest was a little bit overwhelming, and you needed some way of getting through. That's what your body's like; there's a lot of tanglement in here and you want to get it untangled. So think of cutting the breath energy channels through areas you may not have thought of before. Then stay with that. You protect it with your mindfulness, your alertness, and your ardency. And the ardency here starts turning into the discernment that notices what's just right, what's not just right – where there's any unnecessary stress in here, and what to do about it – because you want to make your effort just right.

That was one of Ajaan Lee's really great insights, that of those three qualities associated with mindfulness practice – ardency, alertness and mindfulness – ardency is the discernment

factor. Your desire to do something right: That's the beginning of wisdom. Then there's your desire to develop your discernment so that you can figure out exactly what is "just right" effort: That exercises your wisdom and discernment as well. So we're working on concentration and discernment at the same time, tranquility and insight at the same time, based on desire.

Then, as you have a sense of these qualities working together rather than at cross-purposes, that helps to strengthen your sense of confidence that you can get the mind settled in and be really refreshed from being centered. When you're centered, your powers of mind are going to be a lot sharper so that whatever comes up, you'll have your tools ready. Your knives will be ready to cut right through whatever the problem is. And with the strength of concentration, you'll have the strength to give a good, sharp blow.

So instead of getting your ducks in order, you've got these tools that can be used for any problem. This is one of the Buddha's gifts. When he talks about the four noble truths and the duties that are appropriate for the four noble truths, this is a way of approaching any problem. No matter what your culture, no matter where you're from, you look for where there's stress and you look for what you're doing to cause the stress. Then you try to abandon the cause. And you develop all these tools so you can do it well. Make sure you're doing the duties right.

Again, this is a part of right effort. There are some things to be comprehended, and they all fall under the truth of stress. There are things to be abandoned, which fall under the truth of the cause of stress. All too often, we want to abandon the stress, and it doesn't work out. You've got to figure out what the cause is. It's like going into your house and finding smoke everywhere, and you try to put out the smoke without searching for the fire. It's never going to work—because as long as the fire's burning, more smoke is going to come. What you've got to do is work through the smoke, see where the fire is, put out the fire, and then the problem with the smoke is taken care of.

It's the same with stress. We have to work our way through the stress, first, of a distracted mind. You work through that until you get the mind to settle down. Then you notice that there are subtler levels of stress. You work through those; you find out what's causing all this. You work through them by figuring out, "What's causing this?" Then you abandon the cause. You can put out that fire. Look deeper and put out the next fire – until all the fires are gone. And when your inner fires are gone, outside fires will present no problem at all because they can't burn anything of yours, anything that you've laid hold of, because you don't need to lay hold of anything at all. What you've got is something that's beyond the reach of the fire.

That's the ultimate goal. But even on the way there, the treasures that we build into the mind – our conviction, our virtue, our sense of shame and compunction, our learning, our generosity, our discernment – are treasures that no outside fire can burn. Just make sure your inner fires don't burn them up, and you'll be safe.