

Cutting Roads

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A focused mind can do a lot of good and it can do a lot of damage. It's like the rays of the sun. If you focus them on the right spot, they can start a fire for you when you're cold. If you focus them on the wrong spot, they can start a fire during the dry season that can sweep through the chaparral and cause all sorts of damage. So you have to be very careful about where you focus and how you focus on things. This is why Ajaan Lee recommends that you get very sensitive to how the focus of your mind affects the breath, how it affects the flow of the blood in the different parts of the body, how it affects the flow of the breath energy in different parts of the body. This is something you learn over time.

We all come to meditation with different imbalances in the body: problems with our posture, preconceived notions about which parts the body have to do with the breathing, and which parts get a free ride. If we make up our mind to stay with the breath but don't question those perceptions, we can make things worse.

This is why Ajaan Lee recommends so many different ways of conceiving the breath energies. You can try them out and see what works for any particular set of circumstances in your body: when you need to focus in the head, when you need to focus in the chest, when you need to focus down in the abdomen, how to create a balance among the three, so that no one part of the body is breathing at the expense of the others or getting highlighted at the expense of the others. You want to get a sense of how the breath flows throughout the whole body, where it's blocked, what you're doing to block it.

Sometimes it's just the pressure of your posture. Sometimes it's a pattern of tension that builds up from your hands and feet. Often a good way of preventing yourself from over-controlling the breath is to be very conscious that you're going to keep the hands and feet as relaxed as possible all the way through the breathing cycle. Just that amount of relaxation can help set off a chain reaction that triggers relaxation in other parts of the arms, up through the shoulders, or from the feet up through the legs, the pelvis, and the torso, up into the head.

What this relates to in terms of the classic teachings is the teaching on the potentials, the *dhātu*, sometimes translated as elements. You've got lots of potentials throughout the body—solidity, liquidity, warmth, energy—and the way you focus your attention on them, the way you tune into them, is like tuning in to a particular frequency on radio. Think of all the radio waves that are going through the air right now. All the radio stations in Los Angeles, Tijuana, and San

Diego are sending their radio waves right through us. It's simply a question turning on the radio and choosing the frequencies. We can listen either to KFrog, or whatever comes up from Tijuana, because we focus the radio on that frequency. It gets highlighted and other frequencies don't.

And it's a same with the potentials in the body. The ones you focus on are the ones that get highlighted. The question is one of focusing on them in a way that's useful as opposed to harmful. To some extent, we're focusing on things that are already there, but as you focus on them, in the words of the texts, they get "provoked." So as you provoke the different elements, the question is, which ones are going to be helpful to your concentration, and which ones are going to get in the way.

Ajaan Lee makes a comparison. When you're working with the breath energy flowing through the body, he says it's like cutting roads through a forest. Nowadays, that's a politically charged issue, but back in his time, there was lots of forest, plenty of forest, and people in Thailand needed more roads. So cutting roads was a good thing. Here, you're cutting roads through this mass of sensations in the body, so that the energy can flow easily. Fortunately, you don't have to cut down any trees. It's simply a matter of thinking *relax, relax, relax*, down through the body, down through the legs, down through the arms, and then maintaining that relaxation.

In addition to cutting roads, you also run electric wires. The quality of your energy, as he said, is like electricity running along the wires. If you maintain a steady focus in the right way, you actually energize all the different nerves, all the different blood vessels, in a way that's healthy. It helps the breath energy flow. You don't have to pull the breath energy here or there. All you have to do is just keep the channels open. The energy flows. You not only have communication along the roads, you also have light.

Sometimes you have to check on the electric wires to make sure they're okay. Check on the roads to make sure they're not getting overgrown again. When everything is in good shape, you can stay in one spot, and just have your one little electricity generator in whichever is your chosen spot in the body. If everything else is connected, the good energy in that spot flows everywhere. Then it's simply a matter of maintaining that, keeping it going. When you keep that perception in mind—an energy center with energy flowing from that center in a way that feels good, feels nourishing—then you just learn how to maintain that perception.

Over time, that perception will gain more and more staying power, because the breath gets infused with that association. You tend to associate that level of energy, that type of energy, with the focus the mind on the breath. It's like all the

other good qualities that you try to develop in the meditation: If you infuse them in the breath, then each time you focus back on the breath, you'll be reminded of them.

So try to get more in touch with where things are going well in the body and mind, where things are *not* going well in the body and mind, and what amount of focus is just right: where it should be directed, the times you should settle down in your chosen center, the times you should go out checking the electricity lines, checking the roads, making sure everything is in good order. As you get more and more skilled at keeping things in good order throughout the in-and-out breath, the mind can really settle down.

So keep this in mind. You've got these potentials in the body. It's as if you're tuning in to them, and you want to be careful about how you tune in on them. Sometimes you can tune in to a frequency and you've got the volume so high up that it splits your eardrums. Other times the volume is so low that you can't hear anything at all. So you've got to learn how to tune in, how to adjust.

Or to use Ajaan Lee's image, how to look after this jungle of the body you've got. Make sure the roads don't get overgrown, make sure the electricity lines don't get cut, and that the electricity generator is generating just the right amount of power to keep everything well lit, but without burning out the lines. All of this you learn by watching, by being observant. So keep on watching.