

The Skills of a Hunter

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I was talking to an anthropologist one time, and he was telling me about a trend in anthropology, which is that if you're going to go study a primitive village or tribe, you try to learn all of their skills: the weaving, cooking, building. But he added that there was one skill that anthropologists could never master, and that was hunting. It required a level of concentration, a level of focus and a level of patience that modern people find really hard. If the tribe had to depend on the anthropologist for its food, they'd all die.

This is relevant here because Thai ajaans often compare the skills of meditation to those of hunting. It requires a combination of skills that we tend not to have in the West, we tend not to have in the modern world.

Ajaan Khamdee once noted that, on the one hand, like a hunter, you have to be very still so you don't scare off the game. But at the same time, you also have to be very alert so that you can sense the signs telling you that something's come. That combination of alertness and stillness is really hard to master. But you've got to master it.

We're combining some skills that we have separately, but they tend not to go together. When we focus, we tend to tense up. But here the focus has to be relaxed. When we're trying to be alert, we tense up. Here again, alertness has to be relaxed. When we're relaxed, we tend to fall asleep. And here we have to stay awake. So work on combining those skills, finding the right balance. It's something you have to do. It doesn't come naturally, which is why one of the other qualities of a good hunter is patience. You don't know what time the animal's going to come. So you have to be ready for it to come at any time, and be willing to stay for long periods of time.

Now, this is a patience not just a matter of sitting here, doing nothing. You're sitting here working on your alertness, working on your focus, working on your stillness continuously. And here again, this quality of continuity is something we have to learn and consciously develop.

I read a very foolish comment one time by a British professor, saying that back in the time of the Buddha, people didn't have the level of concentration that we have now, which was why the Buddha had to emphasize it so much. We have to read books, which means we have to stay concentrated. But they never read books, so they never learned how to be concentrated. Total ignorance on his part.

There's an account of a Frenchman who went to live with some Inuit. They were nice enough to build a little extension for their igloo for him. One day, the head of the family where he was staying went out to go fishing. So the Frenchman tagged along. They came to a spot in the ice where there was a fish right under the ice, just sitting very still. So the hunter drilled a little tiny hole into the ice very, very carefully, very slowly so as not to disturb the fish, even though it was in plain sight. It was a little tiny, tiny hole in the ice. Then he fashioned a hook for the bait. It would fit right down the hole, and then it would spring open once it got under the ice. And then he just stayed there.

The Frenchman watched for a while, and then got bored, and got impatient. He got up and started stomping around to get rid of the numbness in his feet. Of course, that scared the fish off. You can imagine what the hunter thought. He'd been sitting there very patiently, because he knew that the fish was battling with itself. Part of it knew there was danger, but the other part was hungry. He was willing to wait until the hunger won out over the wariness. He had developed that skill: staying focused, staying still, while he waited. And part of that skill was being focused but relaxed at the same time.

This is one of the reasons why we work on a full-body awareness, a full-body concentration. In the Buddha's first steps for breath meditation, you're aware of short breathing, long breathing. Then you train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in and breathe out. That's the very beginning of breath meditation. It's the same with the five objects of contemplation in the body. There are 32—31 at the time of the Buddha, 32 by the time of the commentaries—but there are five given the most attention, the ones that a preceptor teaches a new monk: hair of the head, hair of the body, nails, teeth, skin. The question is: Why stop with the skin? One reason, of course, is that those are the five parts of the body that we see, and our ideas of beauty have to do with those five parts. You want to learn how to see that even they are unattractive, to say nothing of what's inside. But the other reason is that when you end with the skin, and you're trying to keep track of where in the body these different parts are, you realize that you're wearing it. It's all around you.

That's the quality of the awareness you want to develop: a sense that you're wearing it. When you're focused on the breath, you're bathed in the breath. Or it might be better to think about wearing your breath in the same way that you wear your skin.

There was another writer who stayed with some Inuit up in Alaska one time. As he went out with them when they went hunting, he said he had the sense that they were wearing the landscape. Their alertness was all around, connected to

their surroundings, but it was focused and centered at the same time. So as you meditate, you want the center, but also the all-around quality around the center, too. So work on that. Work on finding the balance between being focused but relaxed, alert but relaxed, centered but all-around, so that you can maintain that kind of awareness.

That's the secret to patience, which is a quality you really need here. Just as you don't know when the rabbits are going to come, you don't know when your defilements are going to show up. You can be pretty sure they will, because one of the first things you learn as you try to maintain a state of concentration is that there will be parts of the mind that suddenly get bored because they're used to variety. They're used to stimulus.

One of the very first times I taught meditation in the States was to some students back at the college I went to. I'd been invited back to give a talk, and I gave a little meditation workshop. One of the kids, after twenty minutes of meditating, came out and said he was suffering from sensory deprivation. And that was just twenty minutes. We're so used to stimuli all the time. That's our food. Without it, we feel starved.

So you have to learn how to feed off of the activity of staying centered but with an all-around awareness. And stick with it, because it's the only way you're going to get to know your mind. Don't think that when the hunters are sitting there they're not thinking about anything at all, or that they have no desires. We all have a desire here as we practice to get to know the mind so that we can learn how to stop creating suffering. We focus that desire on creating a state of concentration, and we're maintaining it.

As I said the other day, it's like wealth. There are some people who can make wealth but they don't know how to keep it. They squander it. There are those who know how to make it and how to keep it, but they don't know how to use it properly. The ideal person is the one who makes it, keeps it, and uses it properly. And it's the same with the meditation: The ideal meditator can make concentration, maintain it, and put it to use. These are separate skills, and they're all necessary. So learn how to entertain yourself as you maintain this constant state of full-body awareness, centered, wearing the breath. Little thoughts'll come into the mind. Anything that would come in saying, "This is boring. This is stupid. This is whatever," you've got to treat as defilements. You can't side with them. You've got to side with your desire to really know the mind, and to master the skills that are necessary for doing so.

So be very clear about the fact that these are skills that go against a lot of old habits. They require conscious work. But it's good work, because the mind, when

it's been exercised like this, really does have a heightened sense of itself, what the Buddha himself called the heightened mind: *adhicitta*. There's a sense of energy that goes with that, and a sense of inner well-being. Because this centered but broad awareness is healing. It's good for the body, good for the mind. And because it's centered but all around, when defilements come, you know. When insights come, you know them as well.