The Patient Hunter

August, 2001

One of the old similes for the practice of meditation is that you’re like a hunter, trying to hunt down the causes of suffering in the mind and to shoot them right through. It’s a kind of hunting with no bad karmic consequences at all. There’s one point where the Buddha is asked if there’s any killing that he would ever recommend, and he says, “Yes, kill anger.” And that applies to the other defilements as well. Shoot down your lust and passion. Catch hold of your defilements. Trap them, whatever greed, anger, and delusion you have. And then this forest of your mind will be a really good place to stay. But to do that, you need to develop a lot of skills. They get the mind to be quiet the way a hunter has to be quiet, to be alert the way a hunter has to be alert. So concede these things, because the more you practice, and in the beginning it’s shooting down really gross, blatant defilements, but then as you move on they get more and more subtle, which requires more time and more patience, more stillness, more alertness. And the patience there is an important quality. I was once talking to an anthropologist, and in recent decades it’s become a fashion among anthropologists that if you go into a society, and if a society has a lot of manual skills, the anthropologist has to learn those manual skills. He has to learn how to weave baskets the way the people do. He has to learn how to cook the way the people cook. He has to learn how to really get into the culture. And he was telling me that there’s one skill that no anthropologist has ever been able to pick up, and that’s the skill of hunting. If you go out to a hunting and gathering society, the hunters go out in the morning. They come back with food for the day. The anthropologist goes out and never comes back with anything at all. And they try to teach him all the skills about how to shoot a bow and arrow, whatever they use. The anthropologist can do that, but the actual catching of something, they’ve never succeeded. And you have to think about what it is about modern society that makes it impossible for them to learn hunting. And a lot of it is our impatience. One, we’re used to being entertained, and two, we’re used to getting someplace through our impatience. If nothing is happening, we’re going to make it happen. And if it’s not going to happen, then we just don’t want to bother with whatever the whole project was all about. We move on to something else. We don’t have time. That’s a big difference right there. They’re saying that hunting and gathering cultures have more time than anybody else in the world. Who has the most free time in the world? Hunters and gatherers. Who has the least time? People with computers and all the latest old computers. Instead of freeing us to give us more free time, they just take up more and more and more of our time. And our mind gets used to being a mind that has to deal with little tiny packets of time. And if we make time for other people, it has to be quality time. To make time for meditation, we want it to be quality time with the meditation. And we forget that a lot of the meditation is learning patience. That doesn’t mean just getting lazy. It means sticking with it, being consistent. Whether you’re getting immediate results or not, you just stay right there. If any voices come up and say, “This is getting boring. This is getting ridiculous,” just say, “Well, who’s saying that? Who’s bored?” It’s just boredom. It’s not that you’re bored. There is boredom coming through. And then it can go away. We’re used to acting immediately on the slightest impulse in that direction. We have to learn how to overcome that impulse. We have to maintain the kind of steadiness we need. Because hunting down the defilements is like hunting down anything else. You never know where it’s going to be, where they’re going to come, when they’re going to come. So you station yourself at what you think is a good spot. In this case, you station yourself right at the breath. Because if anything’s going to happen in the body or the mind, you’re going to see it if you’re stationed right here. But there’s no guarantee that in the next hour anything interesting is going to happen. But you want to maintain your qualities of alertness and mindfulness nevertheless. Because actually, a lot of things are happening, but it’s very subtle. And the reason you don’t see them is because your mindfulness isn’t steady enough, your alertness isn’t sharp enough, your concentration isn’t established enough. You’re not sensitive enough to what’s going on. So if you find yourself getting bored with what’s going on in meditation, it’s a sign that you’re not really being sensitive to the present moment. Because unlike the animals in the forest, the defilements are flowing through the mind in very subtle stages all the time. A little bit of greed here, a little bit of anger there. It’s like the currents and radio waves in the air. If you’ve got a good receiver, you can pick up these things that are just flowing through. So one cure for boredom is to remind yourself, “Okay, you’re just going through the motions. You’re not really being sensitive.” And the other cure for boredom is to remind yourself, “Well, exactly who’s bored here?” Just because there’s a thought that says, “boredom” or “I’m bored,” doesn’t mean that you’re bored. Who says that you’re the “I”? It’s just a thought that comes through the mind. And it tends to trigger a physical reaction as well. You’ve got to learn how to cut it off before that physical reaction gets triggered. If it does get triggered, breathe right through it. And then continue sitting. Because you never know. Something important may come by at any time. And all too often we miss it. It’s in those little moments, in the cracks between or stretches of mindfulness. That’s when really interesting things happen in the mind. And those are the things that the mind hides from itself. That’s why there’s the crack in mindfulness. It’s kind of a blanking out, a change of scenery. It’s like the way they close the curtains on a stage when they change the scenery. They don’t want you to see the stagehands moving about, because it’s going to destroy the illusion. And the mind creates illusions for itself in just that same way, in these little cracks of mindfulness, these little gaps of alertness. And so, as John Comedy once said, “You’ve got to be still like a hunter,” which means very still, but at the same time very alert, continuously, for the slightest little snap of a twig rustling in the leaves. If you miss those, you’re going to miss your quarry. So it’s a question of sensitivity and patience, working together. Because after all, the restlessness, the thought of boredom, that can become a defilement itself. All too often it points at the meditation. “This is boring.” You say, “Oh, wait a minute. What was that thought all about? Where did that come from?” Well, you weren’t paying attention. You were listening to it instead of stepping back and watching it. You were trying to get the content rather than just looking at it as an event in the mind. So all sorts of interesting things are happening in the mind. It’s a question of being sensitive enough to them and having the patience to let things settle down. Think of the mind as being like water, and it’s muddy water. And how are you going to make it clear? You have to let it sit a long time for the mud to settle down. But our tendency is to see if we can stir it to make it clear. Do something. Of course, that just keeps the mud in suspension. So to be sensitive, you have to be very still, very patient, to catch the details, because everything is in the details. I mean, if they were really blatant, they wouldn’t fool you at all. The thing is, they come in very subtle ways, like little cat feet. What was that Carl Sandburg did? They sneak in. So you have to be sensitive to those little motions in the mind. So when you find yourself getting restless, getting bored, remind yourself, “Okay, you’re missing something important.” Stop and take a good long look, and be willing to spend long periods of time when nothing seems to happen. That is one of the luxuries we have here at the monasteries. There’s a lot of time. You might say it’s the one luxury we all have here. It’s a shame that we tend to throw it away. We let our impatience get in the way. Because steadiness means just that. You stay steady for a long period of time. And it’s a quality our minds aren’t used to. We’re used to being entertained. This happens. That happens. When they invented the remote control, the American ability to meditate took a big step backwards. So you’re sitting here without a remote control. And it’s just your mind. And if nothing else, sitting with it for an hour, you’ve developed patience. And it’s an important quality. It doesn’t seem to be much, but it’s the basis for everything else. Out of the ten perfections, it is the perfection. The traditional story is, if you’re going to develop the perfections, it’s going to take a long period of time. So you’ve got to have the patience to see things through, and not give up. Because when you’re patient, that’s precisely what happens. You do see things that are important that otherwise you’d miss if you felt that you didn’t have the time. you

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