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 in the right spot, they can start a fire for you when you’re cold. If you focus them in the wrong spot, they can start a fire during the dry season. They can sweep through the chaparral and cause all sorts of damage. So you have to be very careful where you focus things and how you focus things. This is why Chan Li 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 the meditation with different sorts of imbalance in the body, problems with our posture, preconceived notions about which parts of the body have to do the breathing, and which parts get a free ride. If we make up our minds we’re going to stay with the breath, but don’t question those perceptions. We can just make things worse. This is why Chan Li recommends so many different ways of conceiving the breath energy, so you can try them out and see what works for some 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. And 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 in your hands and feet, often a good way of preventing yourself from over-controlling the breath. You need 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 into the pelvis and up through the torso, up around into the head. What this relates to in terms of the classic teachings is the teaching on the potentials, the dhatu, 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, it’s like tuning into a particular frequency on the radio. The radio waves are there in the air right now. All the radio stations in Los Angeles and Tijuana and San Diego are sending their radio waves right through us. It’s simply a question of turning on a radio and choosing the frequency, and we can listen either to, what is it, Kay Frog or whatever comes up out of Tijuana. Because we focus the radio on that frequency, it gets highlighted. It’s the same with the potentials in the body. The ones that you focus on are the ones that are going to get highlighted. Now, the question is 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, the words of the text, they get provoked. So as you provoke the different elements, the question is which ones are going to be helpful for your concentration and which ones are going to get in the way. Here’s a comparison. When you’re working with the breath energy flowing down through the body, this is like cutting roads through the forest. Nowadays that’s a politically charged issue, but back in his time, there was lots of forest, plenty of forest, and it needed more roads. So it’s a good thing. You’re cutting roads through this mass of sensations in the body. So the energy can flow easily. Unfortunately, you don’t have to cut down 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 the road, you also run electric wires. Simply the quality of your energy, as he said, is like electricity. It runs 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. All you have to do is just keep the channels open. The energy flows. You don’t only have roads, you have light. Sometimes you have to go down and check on the electrical wires and make sure they’re okay. Make sure the roads are not getting overgrown again. But 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. And if everything else is connected, the energy flows everywhere. Then it’s simply a matter of maintaining that, keeping that going. When you keep that perception in mind of an energy center and the energy flow, flowing from that center in a way that feels good, feels nourishing, you can just learn how to maintain that perception. And over time, that perception will have more and more power, 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 of the mind on the breath. It’s like all the other good qualities we try to develop in the meditation. If you infuse them into 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, where things are not going well in the body, and what amount of focus is just right and where it should be directed. The times that you should settle down in your chosen center and the times when you should go out checking the electricity lines, checking the roads, making sure everything’s in good order. And as you get more and more skilled at keeping things in good order through that in-and-out breath, then the mind can really settle down. So keep this in mind. You’ve got these potentials in the body. It’s like you’re tuning into them. You want to be careful about how you tune into them, because sometimes you can tune into 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 a John Lee’s image, how to look after this jungle of a 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 things well lit, but without burning out the lines. All of this you learn by watching, being observant. So keep on watching.

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