Roads Through the Jungle

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John Lee has a nice image of working with the breath energy in the body. He said it’s like cutting roads through a jungle wilderness. If you’ve ever had to hack your way through a jungle, you know how nice it is to have a road. Once you put the roads through, then you can string up the electric wires and you bring light to the jungle as well. So think of that as you work with the breath energy going down the spine, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, all around the inside of your head, deep into the middle of the head. These are places where you want all the breath energies to flow smoothly and in a coordinated way. And you want all these roads to connect. You want a whole network. It’s a sense of the light. The breath energy is in the body connecting that allows the breath to grow more and more calm, to get to the point where you don’t feel any need to breathe. The mind is still. Everything is all connected. So wherever there’s a sense that there’s a little more breath energy needed in this part or that part, it can move over there immediately from within the body itself. So that whatever oxygen exchange is happening at the skin seems to be enough for whatever the body needs. You can’t force the breath to stop. If you do, you start getting headaches and you suddenly find yourself gasping for air. You simply cut the roads, get everything all connected, and just maintain the network. This is road maintenance work. It’s a lot easier than cutting the roads through. But it may seem to be a little tedious. The roads just keep getting dirty every day, every day. This road threatens to close off, that one threatens to close off, so you’ve got to keep them open. After all, the jungle could grow back and start sending out its little vines across the road. And then the vines become major vines, and then you’ve got tree roots, and then you’ve got branches, and then you’re back to jungle again if you don’t take care of things. And then you have to cut the road again. So once everything is opened up, look after it. Think of the attitude of the forest tradition. I noticed when I went to Thailand, some of my first experiences around monasteries were village monasteries. I was visiting one one time, and the bathrooms could really use a new coat of paint. I mentioned that to some of the people, and they said, “Why bother? Somebody else built that.” It’ll fall down someday, and they will build a new one. The attitude being that they didn’t want to be part of the other person’s merit, a follower of somebody else. They wanted to have their own independent merit. It’s pretty wasteful. In the forest tradition, you have to take care of everything very carefully, very neatly. As John Furran told me about the staying with a jhanmun and how a jhanmun would take old rags and sew them together. At the very least have something to wipe your feet on. And John Lee tells of the story of the old pair of pants that a jhanmun discovered one day as he was on his alms round. He kicked it around until nobody was looking, and then he picked them up, took them back to the monastery, cut them up, and sewed them back into a belt and a shoulder bag for a jhanmun to use. That’s the attitude we want to develop as meditators. You take care of things, keep them clean, keep them in good shape. And then you bring that attitude into the mind. There’s a certain tedium in cleaning up work, but there’s also a sense of satisfaction. I remember reading a piece by a Western monk staying in Thailand. First he looked down on the monks and the nuns in the monastery who spent a lot of time puttering around, cleaning this, cleaning that. He just saw that as a waste of time. He was a serious meditator. He found that after all, just doing the meditation, it got very dry. Then after all, he found himself puttering around with the rest of them. That attitude of just keeping things in good shape is really useful in the meditation. Once you’ve cut these breath channels, these roads through the body where the energy can flow, you’ve expended a lot of the effort. Now it’s a lot easier, actually, to just keep things clean, keep things open, keep things flowing smoothly. The question is, how long is it going to take for the mind to really settle down? How long is it going to take for the breath to go through its stages of settling down? That’s not an issue. The issue is just keep at it. The meditation, the mind, your body, they all have their own rhythm. Your duty is to look after what you can be responsible for and they’ll take care of themselves. And as for any insights that come up in the course of this practice, just notice, “Is this helpful for me right now? Does it help me see through something that could snag me?” Use it and then just put it aside. You’ll find as you’re working on this that the mind is going to jump off here and jump off there a little bit. And if you resist the jump, you’ll be able to see, “Well, what was that jump? What motivated the jump?” In other words, you’re pulling out of it a bit. That way you understand it. And you’ll find you get some interesting, random insights about all kinds of things, about your family, about the attitudes you’ve picked up in past experiences, things going on in the monastery right now, things going on in your life right now. But just make sure you don’t jump along with them. If you jump along with them and say, “Well, that’s a really fascinating insight. Let’s pursue that,” you’ve lost the breath. So for the time being, whatever comes up, just think of it as something that might be useful for firming up your intention to stay here, to get a greater and greater sense of how important it is to develop this quality of the mind. Because seeing how impermanent they are, you can reflect a bit on how, as the Buddha said, there’s nobody you’re going to meet who hasn’t been your mother, or your father, or your brother, or your sister, or your son, or your daughter. You’ve been through all these roles many, many times. Having that larger perspective helps you step back and say, “Okay, that’s just one instance of who knows how many times.” You’ve been on one side or the other in a relationship like that. And then get back to the breath with a greater sense of, “This is one of the reasons we’re here, to get out of those long, long, long entanglements.” So your primary work here is the road maintenance, or the cleaning up. Then find whatever ways you can of encouraging yourself, keeping yourself going, and reminding yourself that if you don’t keep things clean, the jungle’s going to grow back, and you have to cut through the jungle all over again. This is why, as Venerable Jon F. Hoang said, “The work of mindfulness is something small, but it has to be continuous.” In Thai, that’s a pun. They have two words, “nit,” which means small, and “ananda.” The other one, “nit,” is spelled differently but pronounced the same way, which means continuous. So you want to get to the state where everything is open and connected and clean and clear inside, as best as you can make it. And then you just maintain it. So there’s just a little bit of energy that has to be expended, but you can keep at it. This is a lot of what the insight into the meditation involves, is learning how to stick with us and learning how to master this in a way that you can stick with it continually. You don’t have to put so much heavy energy into it that you get worn out. You put the energy in, and the energy comes back. You put it in, and it comes back. You get rewarded and settle down. There’s a greater sense of fullness as all the energy channels open up and connect with one another. They’re not squeezing one another. They’re not pinching one another. They’re not rubbing up against one another. They all flow together. And you’re just balanced right there. This is how things develop in the mind. You don’t have to worry about what’s going to be next. You take care of what you’ve got, and it will develop.

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