Pitching Your Tent in the Present (outdoors)

September 15, 2019

When a forest monk goes out into the forest with his umbrella tent, when evening comes and it’s time to pitch his tent, he has to make a determination that once the tent is pitched, he’s not going to move it around. It’s going to stay right there. Which means, of course, that before he pitches the tent, he has to make a survey. Make sure there are no biting ants, no termites, no other bugs that are going to disturb him, no other animals that will disturb him. If he’s going to pitch it out in the open air, he has to check the horizon to make sure there are no clouds. When he’s found a spot that looks promising, then he pitches his tent and he makes up his mind he’s going to stay. We meditate. We’re going to make up our minds we’re going to stay right here in the present moment, but before we do that, we have to check and make sure everything is ready. You look at your physical surroundings, make sure they’re okay. You look in the body, make sure it’s okay. If any pain is anywhere in the body, you can try to use the breath to soothe them. In other words, breathe in a way that helps to dissolve the tension around the pains. And as for any pains that don’t go away that way, well, you just focus your attention in some other part of the body. There’s got to be some place in the body that you can make comfortable with the way you breathe. And then it’s simply a matter of protecting it. Not squeezing it, not abusing it, not neglecting it, looking after it as best you can. And then you make a survey of the mind. Make sure there’s nothing coming in from the day that’s going to disturb you. If you’ve been holding on to a particular thought, just remind yourself, “This is not the time for that.” This is one of the reasons why when we meditate at night we have those chants to remind you of how much the world gets swept away and all you have left that’s really your own are your actions. Your actions come from where? They come from the mind. So if you want to find happiness, you’ve got to train the mind. As for anyone who you’re angry at in the course of the day or you’ve been irritated, just spread thoughts of goodwill. Both to yourself and to the other person. Realizing that goodwill for yourself means you’re not going to be carrying these things into the meditation. Then when everything is taken care of, then you can settle down and be content to settle down right here. As we mentioned this morning, contentment doesn’t mean just accepting where you are and what you’ve got and just leaving it at that. You accept what you’ve got, but then you look at what are the potentials for developing it. And here you get more deeply into the breath, more deeply into the mind, to see what potentials the breath has for creating a sense of well-being that you can then spread throughout the body. And as you spread it throughout the body, you spread your awareness to cover the body as well. So you have breath, a feeling of pleasure, and awareness all spread out together. So at the present moment it’s a spacious place to stay. At the same time, you’re developing good qualities in the mind. Mindfulness, the ability to keep all this in mind, alertness to what you’re doing, and ardency. You want to do this well. So these are all potentials we have within us that we can develop. As John Lee says, most of us have lots of potentials that we’ve never developed. Good things in the body, good things in the mind. It’s like having an empty lot covered with weeds. Some people look at the lot and all they see are the weeds. Other people see it as a potential place for growing crops. So we all start out with pretty similar bodies, pretty similar minds. But it’s what we make of them that makes all the difference. Think of John Lee himself, this breath meditation method that we’re using. He discovered it one time. He’d gone into the forest, deep into the forest, and it took him three days to walk in there, to spend the three months of the rains. A few days after he arrived, he had a heart attack. That’s where he was. No doctor, no medicine. He was going to get out of there, he had to walk for three days. The one monk who went along with him was not paying him any attention, didn’t know what was going on. So he realized he had to look inside himself if there was going to be any source of a cure. So he had no medicine, no doctors, but he did have his breath. So he contended himself with what are the potentials of the breath. Then he explored them to see how far they could go. And so he was able to use the breath, working with the breath energies, the tightness in the back of his neck, thinking of the breath coming in the back of the neck, then going down the spine. Working through the tightness around his chest, thinking of the breath coming right in there at the middle of the chest, going down through the intestines, breath going down the arms, breath going down the legs, breath going through the head, both inside the body and in a cocoon outside the body. He worked with these energies, and at the end of the three months he was able to walk out. So those are some of the potentials of the breath. He also found awakening at the breath. So as a matter of contending himself, saying, “I’m going to stay right here,” you place some restrictions on yourself. You’re not going to leave the present moment. And then to compensate for that, you allow yourself to fill the present moment as much as you can. So you can see what, in the context of the fullness of the present, you can find that’s of use. So keep this in mind. There are potentials here in the present moment for all kinds of good things. All the things you need to know for awakening are right here. The energies you need to strengthen the body so you can practice more, they’re right here, too. But to learn them, you have to content yourself with staying right here. Start right here, right now. So when the mind wants to wander off, remind it, “You’ve been there before. Everything out there is inconstant, stressful, not-self.” One part of the mind will say, “Well, the concentration is inconstant, stressful, not-self.” This is where you have to say, “Not yet. For the time being, we’re trying to make it as constant as we can, as easeful as we can, and as much under our own control as we can.” It’s only when you fight against those three characteristics that you see exactly where they fight back. And you find that in the territory you can stake out for yourself, that’s where you can build the path. In the beginning, it’s only things that would pull you off the path that you apply those three perceptions. Remind yourself of why you don’t want to go out there, as you stake out your territory here in the present moment. Stake out the place where you’re going to stay, the place whose potentials you’re going to explore. Like a miner staking out a claim to a piece of land. There are potentials in here that you can dig around and find. Think about miners going to places like Nevada or Alaska. Look at the land, it doesn’t seem all that promising. But if you dig down in the right spot, you find all kinds of things that can give you wealth. As the Buddha said, “Here is your spot. You can dig down here and you can find awakening, much better than any gold or diamond ore that you might find someplace else.” So you’ve got a good territory. Lay claim to it and focus all your attention on developing it. It’s only when you’re content to stay here and focus here, that’s when you find that the Buddha is right, these potentials are right here. And the year is not quite for the asking, but if you put in enough work and enough attention, they’re all your own.

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