

# A Clear Agenda

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If you read Ajaan Lee's autobiography, one of the things you notice is the extent to which he would make vows. He'd sit and meditate and have a purpose: a problem he wanted to have clarified, or a question for which he wanted an answer. He would pose it in his mind: "I want to sit here until I get this cleared up." Then he'd drop the question and go into concentration. As his practice developed, the questions he would ask himself and things he wanted to know would get more and more refined.

So you might find it a useful practice as you meditate to ask yourself: "What am I here for?" There's got to be a purpose to what you're doing. Sometimes we hear that meditation is all about having no agendas and not trying to change anything at all. But I've never seen the Buddha describe it that way.

You've got to have a purpose. Think about the four noble truths. They're truths with a purpose: to help you end suffering. Where in the four noble truths is your purpose today? When you see the Buddha's definition of ignorance, it doesn't mean having preconceived notions. It doesn't mean trying to change things. Ignorance means not seeing things in terms of the four noble truths.

For most of us, that definition of ignorance describes the normal state of our mind. We're thinking about other issues, other problems, usually based around our sense of who we are and what we need to keep who we are going—or around the people, the relationships we love, to keep them going as well. Those kinds of issues, those kinds of questions the Buddha said, are ignorance from the point of view of trying to put an end to suffering.

So even though you may have responsibilities in the world, put them aside at least for the time being. The mind will be a lot stronger if you can. You'll also find that there are areas within you where you're creating a lot of unnecessary suffering. That suffering is weighing you down. When you're weighed down, you're less able to deal with your responsibilities. So putting the issues of the world aside is not an irresponsible act.

That's one of your first agendas. It's written into the basic refrain for right mindfulness: subduing greed and distress with reference to the world. All the issues you have about what you want in the world or how you're upset about the world, you just want to put those aside. If they come up in the mind, you put them aside.

I've been reading different books on mindfulness and one of the strangest things I've found was in one book where the author said that the Buddha tells you never to interfere with anything that's happening in the mind. But that right there conflicts with the basic formula: putting aside greed and distress, or subduing greed and distress with reference to the world.

That part of the formula means that you've got to put aside anything that gets in the way of your seeing things simply in terms of the four noble truths. That takes a lot of effort. Sometimes the effort requires a lot of ingenuity on your part; sometimes it's just a matter of watching things, allowing them to subside on their own. This varies from case to case. But even just watching things has an agenda. You're doing it because you want to understand them, or you've found that that's the most effective way of dealing with that particular problem, that particular distraction, at that particular time. We deal with these things because we're here to figure out why we're creating unnecessary suffering and what we can do about it.

Part of what we can do about it, of course, is to develop the path. This is where we're working specifically on the factors of right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. They all go together. And they have to be informed by right view. So those are the factors we've got to get going. Right view itself has an agenda: You want to comprehend suffering so that you can put an end to it.

How does that relate to the breath? Because right view tells you that if you want to put an end to suffering, you need to develop right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration,

and you're using the breath as a focal point for all three of these factors. How are you going to get the mind to stay settled down with the breath? That's the effort right now.

As for right mindfulness, you keep the breath in mind. And regardless of whatever else comes up, you try to relate it to the breath. Feelings come up and you relate them to the breath. "How does this feeling of pleasure or pain relate to the breath? Is it caused by the way I'm breathing? Or is it completely irrelevant?" Say that there's a pain someplace in the body: How does that relate to the breath? Experiment a little bit to find out. Change the way you breathe and see if that changes the pain. Breathe around the pain; breathe through the pain, from the top, the bottom, from the left or right. Change the way you think about the pain and see what that does to the way you breathe in reference to the pain. There are lots of ways to experiment. If nothing seems to work, then you just allow the pain to be there, while you work with other issues in the body. Try to create a sense of well-being someplace else.

This then shades into right concentration. The Buddha says that as soon as you get sensitive to what long breathing feels like and what short breathing feels like, you try to expand your awareness to fill the whole body. Then you look out for what he calls bodily fabrication. This is the intentional element that goes into the in-and-out breath. He says to calm it down. How do you calm it? You're trying to make things more comfortable so that the breath feels less laborious and the body feels at ease. You change the rhythm of the way you breathe. You can make it deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower. You can think of breathing in different parts of the body. If you notice that one set of muscles seems to be doing all the work, give those muscles a holiday. Say, "Okay, for the next few minutes you don't have to do any breathing work at all." And see how the rest of the body responds. Other parts of the body, other muscles will pitch in. They'll do the breathing work for a bit.

You can also change the way you think about the breath, the mental labels with which you perceive it. Sometimes when we think about getting the breath energy to spread through the body, we're trying to push it through other sensations that are already there in the body. And sometimes that creates pressure, friction, a sense of discomfort. So change the perception. Try to think of the in-and-out breath just simply filling up the sensations of the body that are there, without having to run through them. Or think of it slipping through the spaces between the other sensations without pressing on them. It simply suffuses through the body, with a minimum amount of friction, a minimum amount of pushing or pulling. See how that perception changes your sensation of the breath and the extent to which your sense of the body is being fabricated by the way you breathe.

There are lots of things to play with here, lots of things to adjust, lots of questions you can ask yourself around the breath. When the mind has trouble settling down, is it because of the way you breathe? Or is it because of the way you perceive the breath? If you perceive the breath as a more subtle energy suffusing the body, then think of all the breath channels in the body being connected out to every pore. Just hold that perception in mind and see how the body responds.

If you find a sensation that feels really good, what can you do to maintain it? You can't clamp down on it, because that'll spoil it. It's like seeing a beautiful bubble and wanting to catch it, but of course, the act of catching it destroys the bubble. But suppose that the only thing that's going to cause the bubble to break is the wind. In that case, you can cup your hands around it and protect it.

It's similar with really comfortable sensations in the body, especially ones that come from changing the way you breathe. How do you cup your mind and other sensations around them? How can you maintain that perception? How can you maintain that lightness of touch?

As Ajaan Fuang once said, there are basically three stages to the meditation. One is learning how to do it. The second, once you've done it, is how to maintain it. You don't want to just have one little flash of quiet. You want the quiet to stay. So once it's there, how do you relax around it so that it stays without your trying to grab hold of it? Remember, grabbing hold is not the way things like this are maintained.

There was once a woman in Thailand who was meditating in the chedi on the hill at Wat Dhammasathit, and I happened to be watching her meditate. All of a sudden, she reached out as if she were trying to grab something in front of her, fell over, and then looked around to see if anybody was watching. She looked very embarrassed. Later she told me, sheepishly, that she'd had a vision of a golden tray floating in front of her, and her instinct was to grab it. Of course, that destroyed the vision.

So when you find something that's really nice, how do you maintain it? How do you relax around it? How do you give it space? How do you protect it without bursting the bubble? That's an important skill right there.

If your concentration has gotten to the level where it's solid, then you're ready for Ajaan Fuang's third stage: putting your concentration to use. You ask can yourself, "What do I need clarified?" Follow Ajaan Lee's example. You pose the question in your mind. Then you drop it and get into concentration to see if the stillness of the mind will yield an answer.

If the issue is related specifically to what you're doing right here, right now, you approach it differently: Experiment with your breath, your perceptions, and look at what happens as a result. If nothing seems to be happening and you can't figure anything out, just sit and watch for a bit. See what you can observe; see if you can notice anything unexpected in the body or the mind.

So sometimes the meditation involves experimenting, changing this and changing that to see what else gets changed. Sometimes the experiment is just sitting and watching. But either way, there's a purpose. And whether you make a formal vow about trying to figure something out in the course of the meditation, or simply pose a question in your mind and start poking around and exploring, always remember that there is a purpose for being here. We're trying to comprehend suffering to the point where we can abandon its cause. The way we do that is by developing the factors of the path. That's the framework that gives meaning to everything we're doing.

So always try to keep that larger framework in mind. As for anything that gets in the way or obscures that, remember the Buddha's instructions: You try to subdue it.

And that's how you keep on track.