

The Path Is and Isn't the Goal

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As you practice, there's a way in which you have to think that the path is the goal, and there's a way in which you have to think the path is not the goal. The path leads to the goal, so they're two separate things. The way in which the path is the goal is that you have to pay full attention to what you're doing as you practice. You have to give yourself totally to the path. It's not something where you just go through the motions and keep wondering, "When is the goal going to show up, when am I going to get results?" Because your mind, if you're thinking in that way, is divided: the part that's going through the motions, and then the part that's looking for the results, scanning the horizon to see where the results are going to come.

Actually, you're going to find them in the path. In other words, you're going to find them by giving yourself totally, committing yourself totally to being with the breath, getting absorbed in the breath. It may not seem like much, but remember, this is where the Buddha was when he gained awakening. They said he was practicing with his breath, going through all those sixteen steps in breath meditation, and didn't go anywhere else. So if you're going to see anything, it's not on the horizon. It's going to be right here in the breath.

So think about the breath and examine the breath, evaluate the breath. Try to get absorbed in the breathing. This is your ticket. It may not seem like much. That's when you remind yourself, this is not the goal but it's all you've got. This is your ticket out of here: out of suffering, out of all the wandering around. So your sense of the value of the ticket: That's the way in which the path is the goal. You want to give yourself to it totally, commit yourself to it totally. If the mind is going to do any thinking and evaluating, have it think about and evaluate the breath.

This is an important part of getting the mind to settle down. It's not just a wobbly stage that you have to get past. It's the process of fitting the mind together with the breath. You want to think about the breath very consistently and evaluate it very carefully. Give it your full sensitivity. How does the breath feel? Where do you feel it? If it doesn't feel comfortable, what can you do to make it feel more comfortable? What way of experimenting with the breath is too heavy-handed, and what way is just right? These are things you have to find out by paying full attention, being very, very sensitive.

Ajaan Fuang's most frequent meditation advice was: Be observant. Watch the breath. Watch how the mind relates to the breath. And then try to figure out how can you get the two of them together, more and more snugly, more and more consistently, so that you're with the breath all the way in, all the way out; then all the way in again, all the way out again, without break. And you find that it interests you because, after all, the health of the body depends on the breath energy. So at the very least, you want to make sure the breath energy is flowing well in the different parts of the body. It's free medicine, and here's your chance to tap into it. Each breath is an opportunity to learn something new about the breath—about how the in-and-out breath relates to the energy patterns in the different parts of the body, and how your awareness of those energy patterns in the different parts the body will affect the in-and-out breath. The influence goes both ways.

And ask yourself, which parts of the body seem to be holding back from the breath? Which ones are deprived of the breath? Allow them in on the breathing process, so that nothing is held back. You're totally surrounded by the breath. It's on all sides. And it's constantly flowing. We like to put little borders around it, saying that this is where the in-breath begins and that's where the out-breath begins, and this is how far the breath energy goes. But the breath by its nature is not anything you can fence in like that. There's breath energy that's constantly flowing in one particular direction—it might be up, might be down. There's breath energy that spins around in place in different parts of the body. There's the in-and-out breath. Lots of different kinds of energy, and they all mingle together. If we try to place a fence around the breath, what we do is we end up depriving different parts of the body of the energy that they need.

So allow yourself to be totally immersed in the breath. This is why the Buddha when he was talking about mindfulness of the body, didn't say just *kayasati*, which would be mindfulness of the body. It's *kayagatasati*, mindfulness immersed in the body, totally surrounded by the body, totally permeating the body. Whatever thinking you're doing, you're evaluating, thinking about the breath, ways of making it more comfortable, more energizing, whatever's needed right now.

In the beginning, it may be awkward but as you get a better and better feel for the breath, a better and better feel for what's meant by breath energy in the different parts of the body, you find you can breathe in and out of your eyes, your ears, in the middle of the forehead, down from the top of the head. When I was sick with malaria in Thailand the last year before I came back, I found that my breathing was getting more and more laborious, because all those little malaria parasites were eating up the protein in my red blood cells. So the muscles that

were doing most of the breathing work were getting more and more fatigued. I found all I had to do was just shift my perception of where the breath was coming in, where it was going out, and different muscles got engaged. The process of breathing became a lot less laborious, a lot more energizing and nourishing.

So that's another way of dealing with the breath: Ask yourself, how do you perceive the process of breathing? What image do you hold in your mind? That influences which muscles are being used and which muscles are not being used. What happens if you change that image? There's a lot to explore here. And you find that the more you get into the process of breathing, the more you start seeing the mind very clearly, especially as the breath grows more and more full, more and more still, more and more subtle.

Ajaan Lee's image is of the vapor that rises off of ice cubes. The ice cube is still, but there's just a little bit of the vapor-movement around the edges. And then even that stops. As you do this, you find that your perceptions of the breath get more vivid, and your awareness of what's going on in the mind gets more and more vivid as well. And this ticket out becomes more appealing. It's not the little ragged piece of paper that it looked like in the beginning. There's a sense of rapture that you can develop here, a sense of ease, a sense of inner stability, inner solidity. And this is still just the path.

Now, there will come a point where you have to let this go. Because after all, what's the path composed of? There's the form of the body sitting here. There are feelings of pleasure that you're inducing, feelings of ease, feelings of equanimity. There's the perception you hold of the breath, the mental activity of adjusting and investigating, probing, learning about the breath, learning about the mind, and there's consciousness. In other words, you've got the five aggregates right here in your state of right concentration.

So there's still the possibility of clinging right here as well. In fact, in the beginning, this is what you're doing: learning how to cling to the aggregates in a new way as you turn them into the path. But then, ultimately, even that has to be let go. There's a passage where Ajaan Mun says you get to the point where all four noble truths become one. Originally each of the four noble truths has its own duty. You try to comprehend stress. Let go of its cause. Realize the cessation of stress. And then develop the path. So you do a lot of work at developing the path, turning those five aggregates into a path. But that will involve a very subtle clinging.

Then when the path has been fully developed, the duties change. All four of the noble truths have to be let go. You let go of the suffering. You let go of the cause. You let go of the path, and even of the cessation. That's the point where it

becomes clear that the path and the goal really are two separate things. Because the realization that arises as the path is abandoned, as that subtle clinging to concentration gets abandoned—there's no comparison between the path and the goal.

But until you reach that point, you've got to focus on the path. Don't worry about the goal. You've got to give the path your undivided attention because it's in the developing of the path that the realization of the end of suffering is going to be found.

That's one of the paradoxes of the practice. As you're walking the path, you have to give it all the attention that it deserves, which is why you want to treat it as a goal. In other words, treat it as something precious. Each breath is something to be pursued as something valuable, as a source of knowledge, as a guide in how to let go of unskillful mental qualities, and to develop skillful ones.

So give each breath its due respect because as you respect the path, the goal will appear not anywhere else but right here. As the Buddha said, you touch awakening with the body. It becomes a total experience right here where you've been looking at the breath all this time. Something else comes in right here. So there's nowhere else you have to look. But there is a lot of work to do to develop the qualities that enable you to see right here what the Buddha found right here.