

## *Stay*

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The Pali word *samma*—as in *samma ditthi*, right view, or *samma sankappo* right resolve—can also have the meaning of just right, balanced, steady. That’s how Ajaan Fuang liked to interpret it. And it’s an important concept to keep in mind as we practice, especially as we’re working on concentration. We’re trying to bring the mind into balance and then maintain that balance. Sometimes the getting into balance is the harder part, and sometimes the maintaining is the harder part. You want to be good at both. Getting into balance means you have to direct the mind in the right direction. If it’s too active, you have to think of ways of calming it down. If it’s too sluggish, you have to think of ways of giving it more energy. In other words, you have to do some figuring out as part of this process of getting the mind to settle down.

This is why the Buddha included directed thought and evaluation as two of the factors of first jhana. You’re talking to yourself, trying to figure things out. You see this in his instructions on right mindfulness. If you notice that there’s sensual desire, you remind yourself, “Sensual desire has arisen within me.” And you notice when it’s not there. If it’s being replaced by ill-will, or when good factors arise, you want to notice that they’re there as well. You talk to yourself about that. The sentences in the sutta are, “Mindfulness has arisen within me. Analysis of qualities, persistence, rapture, these things have arisen within me.” This is part of the mind’s dialogue with itself. So if you see something that needs to be abandoned, you abandon it. If you see something that needs to be maintained, you maintain it so that you can shepherd the mind in to a state where it feels perfectly balanced.

And then, then when it’s balanced, you try to maintain that.

Think of a person walking on a tightrope. It’s not that the person is rigid all across the rope. As soon as the person senses things falling out of balance in one direction, he or she knows how to compensate. That requires a steadiness of focus and, at the same time, a certain fluidity around that steadiness so that it’s not tight. If the person stood rigid, he or she would fall off the rope.

So you have to hover around your mind-state to keep it right where it is. Basically, you tell it to stay. You’ve probably noticed that if you tell a dog to stay, its feet are there but its body is just quivering with the desire to move on. In the same way, the mind will have a kind of quivering: What’s next, what’s next, what’s next? We’re impatient. “We’ve only got one week left. We’ve got to get to insight.”

Recognize that kind of thinking as a disturbance. It's restlessness and anxiety. Even though it seems to be skillful in its aims, it's not skillful right now. It's not right for this time and place. What's right for right now is figuring out how to get the mind into balance and then keep it there.

Try to find a spot in the body where you feel most easily able to stay focused. Then, as you focus there, you'll find patterns of tension building up as you try to keep it there. Okay, learn what you can let go of without losing your focus.

When the Buddha talks about spreading ease and rapture through the body, sometimes it's more a matter of allowing certain patterns of tension to relax, relax, relax and then the relaxation, the ease, will come. As for the rapture, remember that rapture can come in different levels, from a simple level of refreshment to really intense energy, intense gratification, a fullness of the body and mind.

The important point in any case is that you're able to maintain your focus as easily as possible. There may be some clamping down, but as you get more and more skilled at this, you realize that you can let go of some of the clamping down. And so, instead of being quivering with anticipation, with the desire to move on, you realize that the desire to move on is part of the problem, and you can let it go. Notice where it's felt in the body and get around that desire, sort of through the back door, and allow the physical manifestation to relax, relax, relax, as you maintain this center here.

Thoughts will come up: "This is stupid. I'm not analyzing anything here and I'm not getting any insight." Just drop those thoughts. It's as if you're poised about to act, but you don't act. You could at any moment think about something but you don't. Thoughts will come up on their own. The potential for thoughts will come up, and if you recognize them in time, they don't have to bloom into full-blown thoughts. It's just a potential, and then you relax it. Another potential and you relax it. Part of the mind will be curious as to what that thought might be about—and what about this thought over there? You have to remind yourself that that's not what we're here for.

We're here to master the skill of how to stay. That's it. Doesn't sound very exalted. Doesn't sound very profound, but it's an important skill to master. And your quest for something exalted or profound: You've got to recognize that as a disturbance in the present moment, too. Just let it go, let it go. You've got to just stay right here and maintain this sense of being balanced. If any urges come up, you recognize, "This could undo your balance." You've got to maintain your balance at all costs and then just protect it.

This is what mindfulness and alertness are for at this stage in the practice: hovering around the sense of stillness, protecting it. And you may say "What am I

learning?” And you can reply, “This is not the time to learn anything yet except for the skill of how to stay with this through the next breath, and then the next breath, and then the next breath.” If things get dull, you ask yourself, “How can I energize things a little bit?” In other words, you work on maintaining the balance together with your interest in the balance, and it’s very subtle work.

Why do we do this? So that we can see the very subtle movements of the mind. Without this kind of stillness, without this ability to maintain your balance for long periods of time, you’re going to miss all the important things because the important things come in subtle form. It’s not that the Buddha’s asking you to find out what’s happening on Mars, on Saturn, or in the Andromeda Galaxy, or what’s happening in the Amazonian Jungle, or whatever. We’re right here. You want to see what’s going on right here. And the reason we’ve been missing all these important things is that we’re looking for the more blatant things. One, if we’re actually looking at the present moment, we’re looking for what’s blatant. And two, we often tend to be just passing through the present moment, on our way some place else. So we’ve got to correct that momentum.

Correct all the urges that go with that desire to just be getting on with the next thing, getting on with the next thing. You’ve got to stay with *this* thing, and protect this thing that you’ve got: a centered awareness. As Ajaan Maha Boowa said “This center of awareness is the essence of the state of becoming.” But then, after all, that’s what concentration is. You’re trying to create a state of becoming so that you can understand becoming. So you want to stay with that center so that you can use it to gain subtle understandings, to gain clear understanding of whatever else is going on in the mind—anything that would come to knock you off that center, even though it may sound like a wise, or good, or skillful desire.

Now, you do want to gain, make progress in the practice, and you want to be heedful and keep pushing forward. But there are times to push, and there are times not to push. There are times when moving forward means learning to stay. There are times, as the Buddha says, to exert a fabrication, and there are times to just watch. So if you’re going to tell this dog to stay, you also have to teach it how to stay relaxed around the spot where it’s staying, and how not to let it get caught up in any of the urges that may suddenly bubble up.

Patterns of tension that arise, you just zap them. Just think of them dissolving away in your gaze. An image that you might want to use is of a spider on a web. The spider stays hidden on one side of the web, waiting for some fly to get caught in the web. As soon as the fly comes, the spider moves out of its spot, goes over, wraps up the fly, and gets back to its spot. Here, though, you stay with your spot, but if you notice that there’s a pattern of tension developing a little knot of energy,

you move over to unravel it and then move back to your spot. That's why you have to be watchful.

Ajaan Khamdee's analogy is of a hunter. You have to be very still but also very alert. Otherwise you're not going to get your game.

So remind yourself to be on your guard. The stillness here has the need to protect it, so that it stays in balance, so that it stays just right for as long as you can manage. It may not seem like much but it's one of the most essential factors of the path. Only when you stay right here can you see things from the perspective that the Buddha wanted you to look at them from.

So see if you can muster up all the qualities that are needed in order to stay, because it's not a small thing. The mind is so easily hoodwinked into moving off, getting entangled in some thought world. This is what *samsāra* is all about. You're wandering around. Now, though, you're going to stop wandering. It's going to take a while to get used to this new skill so that when you tell the mind to stay, it can stay.

I once knew of someone who was looking for a dog that would be super obedient: You could tell it to stay, then go off and come back eight hours later, and the dog would still be there in the position. Which is unrealistic for dogs but, after all, we're not here training a dog. We're here training the mind. And so it's not too much to ask to get the mind to be in position, and just try to stay, stay, stay right there.

And if part of the mind rebels, you keep reminding it that there's a purpose to this. It's not just the staying, because once the mind can stay, then you can use it. As Ajaan Fuang used to say, there are three parts to the meditation. One is learning how to do it, the others are how to maintain it and then how to use it. But before you can really use it for the highest purposes, you have to work on the maintaining. Of course, as you maintain it, you'll be able to put it to use as you have to. As you go through life you're going to need whatever powers of concentration, whatever powers of mindfulness and discernment you can muster at any one time. You can't tell the problems of life, "Go away and come back when I'm ready for you." Some of them demand to be resolved right then, right there, and so you use what you've got. But at the same time, you also want to be continually working on improving what you've got in terms of your powers of concentration, equanimity, stillness, serenity—all the factors of awakening—bringing them all into balance.

So it's not just a matter of dealing with everyday problems. You're also dealing with deeper problems in the mind: Why is there suffering? Why do the craving and clinging keep leading to becoming? Why do our actions always keep leading

to suffering, even when we don't intend to do things for the sake of suffering?  
These are the questions you can answer only when the mind gets really still and  
can learn how to stay still.

So try to make that part of your repertoire of skills.