

Path & Goal

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I think it was Ajaan Chah who said that the path is like a mango: It doesn't have a beginning, it doesn't have an end that you can point to and say, "This is where you are now and you're going to move over someplace else." You basically stay right here, just as the mango stays in one place on the tree as it ripens. Your practice will ripen that way, too.

We do have a goal in the practice: Our goal is to put an end to suffering. But we have to learn how to relate to that goal in the right way. There is the pain that the Buddha calls "renunciate pain," where you realize that it is possible to put an end to suffering but you're not there yet. Other people have done it, but you haven't done it yet. It's a painful thought, but it's part of our motivation.

We can't let that pain overwhelm us. We have to remember that when the goal is found, it's going to be found right here. So it's a question of learning how to settle in properly right here. And if you don't like the idea of a goal hanging over your head, remind yourself that a large part of settling right in here is learning to find something that's pleasing right here. As the Buddha said, you want to find a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, a sense of rapture, and indulge in it. So you get to choose: What kind of breathing feels good right now? When you find something that seems promising, hold on to it. Stick with it, because it will develop. It's not the case that when rapture hits, it hits out of nowhere, one-hundred percent. It grows on you gradually.

The same with the pleasure: It grows on you. In the beginning, it's not all that impressive, but you can ask yourself: "What can I do to make it feel at least a little bit better? What kind of breathing would I like right now?" This is a large part of the concentration practice: finding something you like. You're not doing this because anyone else told you. As Ajaan Fuang liked to say, "We're nobody's servant. We're not here because anybody paid us or gave us permission to practice. We're here because we want to." So what would make you want to stay in the present moment? What kind of breathing? What kind of sense of pleasure in the body would make you want to stay? Steer the breath in that direction.

Dogen, the Zen master, made the comment one time that the development of the path is no different from the realization of the cessation of suffering. In other words, it's not the case that the act of developing the path is one thing and the act of realizing the cessation is something else. There's not going to be a place in the path where you have to drop the path and turn to the question of "Where is the cessation of suffering and how do I realize that?" It's going to be found right here in the act of developing the path. Everything you need to know is going to be found right here. So even though we do have a goal at the end of the path and it will come at its point in time—it's not here at the moment—you're going to find it right here.

So have a sense of what is “just right” as you’re settling down.

This is a point that Ajaan Fuang made a lot of: that *samma* in *samma samadhi*, right concentration, has to be understood as “just right,” because you need to balance a lot of things. You think about the breath and then you evaluate it. Now, the evaluation does involve thinking, asking questions, making comments. It may seem like a disturbance, but it’s actually an important part of adjusting things inside so they feel good.

Ajaan Lee’s image is of holding on to a post and running around. As long as you keep your grasp on the post really solid, really firm, you can run around the post as many times as you want and you don’t get dizzy. But if you spin around outside without holding on to anything, you get dizzy really fast. So you’re going to be thinking about this one thing: the breath. Content yourself with the fact that whatever pleasure you’re going to find out of the practice is going to be found right here. Whatever sense of fulfillment you’re going to find in the practice will be found right here.

So adjust things: Make sure the breath is not too long, too short, too deep, too shallow. Have it just right. Then adjust your mind. This is where the steps in breath meditation come in, in the third tetrad. If you notice that the mind has too much energy, what do you do to steady it, to concentrate it? If it has too little energy—you’re feeling depressed, you’re feeling discouraged—what can you do to uplift it, gladden it?

This requires directed thought and evaluation, too. Because sometimes the breath will perform that function of steadying or gladdening. Other times, you’ve got to think about other things: topics that will give more energy to the mind, or topics that will steady the mind. The ones that give energy are the things like recollection of your virtue, recollection of your generosity, recollection of the devas, realizing that the qualities that make a person into a deva are qualities that you have in yourself, so you’re headed in the right direction. That can lift you up.

Things that steady you are contemplation of the body in terms of its different parts. After all, if lust or desire’s pulling you away, what is there? Which part are you lusting after: The liver? The stomach? Contents of the stomach? The blood? The lymph? The lungs? None of those things. You can think about the themes of inconstancy, the themes of not-self: Those steady the mind. When the mind has been chastened a bit like this, then it’s ready to settle down.

So you *are* thinking. There is the disturbance of the thinking, but it’s a necessary disturbance. This is what you find with all the levels of concentration: that as you go from one level to another, there’s a disturbance in the first that you’re going to be letting go of when you get to the next. But you have to let go at the right time. Because those disturbances in the earlier levels of concentration actually perform a function. When you need your directed thought and evaluation, it’s because the mind and the breath are not fitting together quite right, so you’ve got to think about them. Look at them. Examine them. Use your ingenuity in getting them to fit together. It’s like putting together a chest of drawers. If the drawers don’t fit

quite right—they're a little bit hard to get in, hard to get out—which parts do you sand? You sand them just right. If you sand them too much, then they get loose. You work on them so that they're just right, and the different parts will fit together just right.

Then you can drop the directed thought and evaluation and can be nourished by the sense of ease, the sense of rapture that come from being focused. As long as you need that rapture to give you energy, you stick with it. There will come a time, though, when it feels like too much. You don't need it any more. That's when you let go.

It's in this way that each of these factors performs its function and then you can put it aside. Ajaan Fuang had the image of a rocket going to the moon. As he said, you need the booster to take you part of the way, and then you have to put the booster aside. Then there's the second stage, and when it's done its job, you put that aside. But you have to know exactly when is the right time to put them aside. You learn that by trial and error.

But it's all a matter of settling in right here and asking yourself: "What feels really good? Which feels better?" You're learning to become a connoisseur of your concentration, a connoisseur of your breath, a connoisseur of the potentials in the present moment. Then, as with any connoisseur, you're indulging your sense of what feels really good. There's no objective standard out there saying that your breath has to be like "this," or the place you focus has to be right "there." You can focus anywhere in the body you want. You can take pleasure in any kind of breathing you like. No one's imposing this on you. This is your expression of freedom.

People who have trouble living with goals usually have a problem right there: The goal is being imposed by somebody else. Somebody else is out there with a measuring stick, and they feel they have to deny their own pleasure in the present moment to meet up with somebody else's standards. But here the standards are set by your sense of what feels right in the present moment. If you stay with it long enough and you're honest enough with yourself, then your sense of what's right, what's just right, will get more refined. And it's in the refinement that your discernment gets developed.

You think of the path: The image the Buddha gives is of the continental shelf off of India. There's a gradual slope going out and then a sudden drop. The gradual slope is the gradual development of your discernment as you get more and more discerning as to what's just right. Remember, this is the middle way, and finding the just-right point in the middle is a lot harder than going to extremes. With extremes you just push, push, push. It doesn't require much discernment. But finding and maintaining the just-right point in the middle: That requires a lot of discernment. And you're going to be going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth to find it, but your sensitivity gets more and more focused with time.

And a large part of the motivation is that it's really pleasing. It feels really right. Not just pleasant, but right. The mind settles down where you have a feeling it really should be "right here"—again, not because anybody told you, because after all, how is anybody going to tell you

where you are? You know yourself.

So let your own sensitivity, your own desire for a sense well-being in the present moment, be your guide. That way you'll find that you've reached the goal without even thinking about it.

Some of the ajaans talk about making your body the path: This is how you do it. You stay right here. You simply get better and better at finding a way to enjoy staying just right, right here. If you follow that direction, you're sure to arrive at the goal.