

## *Evaluation*

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The word *vicara*, when it's used in everyday Pali to describe everyday affairs, means "evaluation." One of Ajaan Lee's discoveries—or main contributions to understanding the Buddha's teachings on concentration—was to point out that it has the same meaning in concentration practice.

The reason that this is a discovery is because the commentaries define it in a different way. In everyday language, they say it means evaluation, but in the course of meditation you don't evaluate anything, they say; you just stick your thoughts on one topic and then you maintain your thought on that one topic, and the thought—according to the Commentary—doesn't involve any evaluation at all. You just keep on thinking the same thought, applying the perception to whatever your topic is.

That doesn't help, though, you if you're having trouble settling down. But if you actually evaluate what's going on, you can improve the situation. You evaluate the breath. You evaluate the way you're perceiving the breath, the mental images you have of the breath, the way you discuss the breath with yourself, and then you make adjustments. That way, the breath becomes comfortable, the mind can begin to settle down with a sense of ease and well-being, and the mind and the breath can become snug together. That's the point where you don't have to evaluate things anymore. Then you can just settle in.

As Ajaan Lee pointed out, the evaluation there is the beginning of discernment. You don't just accept things as they are. You ask yourself, "What's going wrong? What can be improved? And, once it's been improved, what can you do with it?" As with the breath: Is it too long? Too short? Too fast? Too slow? How about finding some way to get it just right? Then, when it's just right, there's going to be a sense of ease, well-being. How do you maximize that? How do you maintain that? And, in maintaining it, how do you let it spread?

Think of the breath energy going throughout the body. This is another one of Ajaan Lee's contributions: talking about the breath not only in terms of the in-and-out breath, but also in terms of this energy flow throughout the body.

Because as the Buddha says at many points, once there's a sense of ease and well-being as the mind begins to settle in, you let it spread so that it saturates the whole body. But he doesn't explain how. You have to ask yourself: What good ways of perceiving the flow of ease and well-being would actually help it saturate the body? Ajaan Lee points out that if you think of the breath as a full-body

process, it gets a lot easier for the sense of ease and well-being to spread along with that whole-body breath.

The important thing is that you get a sense of what's working, and what's just right. This is where you're developing your own discernment, because nobody can get into your mind and calibrate things for you, saying, "Just right is 49.3," or, "56.2." There's no breath-comfort gauge. It's up to you to learn how to evaluate things, and then learn how to evaluate your evaluation, to see when you're being reliable and when you're not.

In the beginning, you may not be sure, but you give it a try. After all, that's the only way you're going to learn: if you try things out and then you look at the results. Then you make a few changes and look at the results again.

This is where Ajaan Fuang's two main instructions for meditation come in handy. You observe—which is part of the evaluation—and then you use your ingenuity: If things are not working out, what can you do to change them? Learn to think outside the box a little bit.

But over time you become a more and more reliable evaluator, and you learn to trust yourself—your ability to read situations. This is where the practice of concentration can then spread to the rest of your life.

We start out with the assumption that we're causing ourselves suffering—which means we've got some bad habits—but we can change. Still, nobody else can change them for us; we have to learn how to step back and evaluate what we're doing. If there's something wrong in our lives, what actions are causing it? Is it the way we think? Is it the way we speak? Is it the way we talk? If it's the way we think, exactly which thoughts are skillful and which ones are not? Which ones are the troublemakers and which ones are the trouble-solvers?

If you have some confidence in your ability to read your mind—to evaluate the mind—then you get more and more confident in the changes you make. But again, the confidence has to be based on some experience. You don't just put gold stars all over your mind and say that whatever you do, whatever you think, is great. That's a lack of evaluation.

If you find you've got a bad habit, you ask yourself, "What's going into that bad habit? How do I think about that? Why do I fall into that way of relating to myself and relating to other people? And what can I do to change?" You try a few changes, see if they work, and if they don't work, you don't get discouraged; you just come back and try again, try again, and try to read the situation so that you can see: Exactly where are the causes of the problem?

It has to be in something you're doing. Now, this doesn't mean that you're totally responsible for everything around you outside. There are people out there

doing lots of unskillful things in the world, and you're going to be putting up with a lot of their lack of skill that you can't change. But what you *can* change is how you respond to all that, and the extent to which you actually make yourself suffer from other people's lack of skill.

The big message of the four noble truths is that the suffering that weighs down the mind comes from your own actions. This is a message that some people find depressing—it means they have to change. But other people find it liberating—they *can* change and, if they change, they can make a difference. Those are the ones who are going to benefit from those truths.

But here again you're going to have to learn by trial and error, observing: Exactly what are you doing? What might you change? Look around. See how other people behave. This is why we have Dhamma books: They give you some ideas about where the problem might be, and some different ways of thinking about it.

All too often we think that what the Buddha taught was perfectly fine for 2,500 years ago—he lived in another culture, in another time—but we live in modern times, so his teachings become quaint. We see them as antiquated, which means we're not getting the most use out of them. We take our own ways of reading the situation too seriously and we're not willing to learn from the advice that's freely given by people who are truly wise.

Remember, when the Buddha was talking to the Kalamas, he wasn't just saying, "Go by your sense of right and wrong," or, "Just believe yourself," or even, "Just observe your own actions." He also said, "Listen to the counsel of the wise." They've got plenty of ideas, plenty of experience. Where did they get their experience? From listening to other wise people, and also looking at their own actions, seeing what worked, what didn't work. Once they'd learned what worked, they didn't want to just sit on their knowledge. They used it for themselves and they were happy to share it, because this is the kind of knowledge that's really good to share.

There are so many subjects out there in the world where you share your knowledge and other people can abuse it. I remember when I was teaching English in Thailand before I ordained. Every now and then the thought would occur to me: "What if my students take this knowledge of English and use it in the wrong way, to cheat or embezzle?" There was no way to stop them. But the knowledge of the Dhamma is specifically designed to be helpful here inside. When you use it, you benefit and the people around you benefit. It doesn't cause any harm, and it can't be used to cause harm—as long as it's genuine Dhamma.

So, as you're meditating, remember that your ability to evaluate how things are going, even though it may seem like a disturbance in the mind as you're trying to get it to settle down, is a necessary part of getting it to settle down: to get things adjusted so that the mind is snug with the body, the mind is snug with the breath, and a sense of well-being flows throughout the body. You can really settle in because you've learned how to evaluate, you've learned how to judge things and adjust them.

You see that *this* is different from *that*. The Buddha never said that wisdom sees everything as oneness. He says it's a matter of seeing things as separate, and then you see which separate things are related to one another, which ones are not, and you learn how to use that knowledge properly.

We're not presented with the present moment simply as a done deal. We're actively shaping it as we go through time. So you want to learn how to shape it more and more skillfully. And, again, you learn that by evaluating.

This act of evaluation is *the* necessary element in any skill. So learn how to evaluate. Learn how to evaluate your evaluation, so that you can begin to get a sense of when you can trust your reading of the situation and when you can't—and when you have to make improvements.

And be confident that improvements can be made. Nobody here has any problems that nobody else has ever had in the history of the world. Nobody here has any problems that people who have been practicing the Dhamma in the past haven't already had. They were human beings, they had their failings, but they were able to overcome their failings and solve their problems. And always be confident: If they could do it, you can do it, too.

So look carefully at how they did it and learn the lessons that they have to offer, so that you can build on their discernment and start developing your own discernment, discernment that you can trust, the discernment that really does make a difference—a difference that's all for the good.