

## *Three Levels of Evaluation*

*September 29, 2009*

Two nights ago it was so hot that most of us were sitting outside to catch what little breeze there might be. Tonight it's so cold that we're closing the windows, and people are all bundled up. It's hard to find conditions that are just right in every way. The world seems to swing back and forth from one extreme to the other. It's pretty much the same way with our minds. We can go through swings of extreme enthusiasm and extreme laziness; days when everything seems to be going perfectly fine—you sit down and meditate, and the mind is very obedient—and then, not much longer after that, it goes totally wild, out of control.

So you've got to learn how to bring it under control yourself. Learn how to moderate it. If you're going to gain a place of just right, it has to come from the path, this practice we're doing. As Ajaan Mun once said, it's normal that when the mind starts on the path it's going to go from one extreme to the other. But you've got to learn from the extremes to see how you can bring things back to the middle. And a good place to learn about this is at the breath.

The texts say that there are five factors that go into the first jhana: directed thought, evaluation, singleness of preoccupation, pleasure, and rapture. Ajaan Lee makes a really useful observation about them, that the first three—directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation—are the causes. Those are the factors you can do, whereas the other two factors are results. So you focus on trying to keep the mind with one object. You direct it, say, to the breath. And the really important factor in all of this is evaluation, learning how to gain a sense of what's just right for the body, what kind of breathing is just right for the mind; what, when you're out of balance, can bring things back into balance. Experiment. If you breathed a little bit longer, what would the results be? Then, when you've tried long breathing for a while, you might try even longer. Or you might try shorter.

Evaluation here involves three things: One, try to figure out what changes you can make. Two, learn how to evaluate the results of those changes to see what's working well and what's not. Then three: when things are going well, how do you make the most use of the sense of ease and rapture that can come when things are going well?

To begin with, it's good to remember there are lots of ways you can conceive the breath, and they'll give you different ideas of what the possibilities are. If you think of the breath only as air pumping in and out of the lungs, there's just a limited range of possibilities. If you think of it more as breath energy, that widens the range because the breath energy can come in and out at any spot of the body and can permeate every part of the body. Ajaan Fuang once talked about the breath in the bones. Have you ever looked at the breath in your bones? There's also breath energy surrounding the body, like a cocoon. Is that cocoon of energy in good shape? Can you sense it? Some people can, some people can't right off. But as you get more and more sensitive to the breath energy in the body, you realize it is there and you can tell when there's a rip or a tear in the breath energy surrounding the body. And you can think of healing it.

So that's the first part of evaluation: thinking of the breath in different ways to see which way is most helpful right now. You might think of what Ajaan Lee calls the up-flowing breath, which is the breath coming up from the base of the spine up through the head, and goes out the top of the head. Or you can think of it coming from the soles of your feet up to the top of the head, supporting the body so that you're not slouching down as you sit. Or you might find that the breath energy flowing up from the body is getting stuck in your head. Hakuin, the famous Zen monk, talks about suffering from Zen sickness. Basically it was breath energy getting stuck in his head. To counteract it, he'd visualize a ball of butter on the top of his head melting down

over the body. That was how he brought the energy back down.

You might also think of the breath energy coming in and out the palms of your hands or the soles of your feet. If there's a tightness or heaviness, say, in your chest, think of it flowing out your arms and out the palms of your hands. If there's a tension in your hips, think of the energy flowing down through the hips and out the soles of your feet. In other words, this part of evaluation has to do with your ingenuity in conceiving the breath energy and what you can do with it.

The next step is actually learning how to read the results of what you've done. Sometimes you can get stuck on very subtle breathing, which may seem very still, very relaxing, very calming, and you stick with it sometimes for days on end. What it can sometimes do, though, is to drain the energy in the body.

Years ago, Yom Thaem, an old woman who had been studying with Ajaan Fuang, came to stay at the monastery. As we were sitting in meditation one evening, he called out to her. "You've been stuck on cool breathing now for weeks," he said. "It's not good for you"—cool breathing here meaning a very subtle, very still, very relaxed level of breath. Sometimes it's good to breathe in a way that's relaxing, but other times you've got to find a way of breathing that's more energizing. You've got to learn how to read what your body needs.

Ajaan Lee compares it to being a good parent. When your child cries, you know what the child needs. You learn how to read the cry and you have different ways of dealing with the child—picking it up, walking around, giving it something to eat, putting it in a swing, whatever you sense is going to work. The more familiar you are with your child, the more you can read the cries. And the same with the breath: When things aren't going well with the body, you want to observe *why* they're not going well: Exactly what kind of not going well is this? Too much energy? Too little energy? Is the breath flowing up too much or down too much? Is the breath energy dead and lifeless? Or is it too scattered? Then try to think of ways of bringing it back into balance. Then, again, you read what you've got: Is it working? If it's not working, try something else.

This also means, however, learning how to read how long you need to stick with something before you can evaluate the results. Sometimes you can tell immediately. You try a certain way of breathing and can know right away that it's not right for the body. Other times it takes a while. Back when I had migraines, I found that really deep forceful breathing could be very helpful. It didn't feel comfortable at first but after a while I began to notice that it really was having a good effect on the body. So I stuck with it until it had done its work, and then I let things relax. So sometimes you can't tell right away what's going to work and what's not. But this is one of the reasons why we sit and meditate so long, so that we'll have time to experiment.

When you sense that the results are going the way you want, that's when you come to the third aspect of evaluation, which is how to make the most use of these good results, how to maintain them. Say there's a sense of ease and wellbeing in the middle of the chest: How do you maintain that ease and wellbeing? What way do you breathe? How do you adjust your breath so as to maintain that sense all way through the in-breath, all the way through the out?

Once you can do that, how do you let that sense of ease spread through the different parts of the body? Where are the channels where it can spread? What kind of spreading forces things too much and spoils the whole effect? In other words how much allowing is involved, and how much actually opening things up and consciously spreading do you need to do? These are questions only you can answer for yourself. No one else can answer them for you.

So these are the three aspects of evaluation. You start with using your ingenuity in thinking of different ways of working with the breath and working with the mind—i.e., focusing on different parts of the body, noticing how much pressure you need to exert in order to keep the focus there, how much pressure is too much, how much pressure is not enough. Then you learn how to read the results of what you're doing, to read the situation you're starting out with, and to read when you're getting good results and when you're not. And then three, when you do get good results, use your ingenuity to figure out what you can do with them: how you can maximize them so that the mind can stay still and balanced for a long period of time, how to keep the mind clear so that you can get the higher benefits of concentration, i.e., the discernment that can come when

things are very clear in the mind, with a strong foundation of mindfulness and alertness. It's a lot easier to keep the breath in mind throughout the day when the breath feels really good. You can walk around and just be filled with a sense of just that: fullness. When you do that, you find it a lot easier to stay centered in the body. The mind is not really interested in going off anywhere else because it feels so gratified.

So this factor of evaluation is the really important one in getting all the other factors of first jhana together. If you evaluate the breath in a way that makes it more comfortable, and the sensation of the breathing more interesting, it's a lot easier to keep your mind focused on the breath and to stay there, to maintain a sense of singleness, which means both having one object in mind and then having that one object or that one perception fill the whole range of your awareness, throughout the body and even around the body, including the cocoon of energy outside. The sign that your evaluation is going well is that the sense of fullness in the body becomes more and more pronounced, with a sense of ease, wellbeing, pleasure simply in being here with the breath, being here in the body, letting all the different breath channels in the body connect so that everything in the body feels unified.

All of this depends on how carefully you do this process of evaluation, how you bring your powers of observation to bear. Some people have said that the factor of evaluation is simply the wobbling of the mind because your concentration isn't solid enough, but that's not really the case. You need to do this evaluation to get the mind and its object snugly together, so that they're on good terms with each other. And as Ajaan Fuang would say, once things are just right, you reach the point where you realize you don't need to evaluate things any more. The breath is just right coming in, just right going out, and you can't really improve it. His image is of a large water jar like they have in Thailand, where they collect the rain water coming off the roofs of houses. He said you fill up the water jar, and it gets to the point where it's so full you can't really add any more. If you try adding more water, it just spills out. The jar can't get any more full than that. That's the point where you can let the evaluation go and just become one with the breath. The awareness fills the body; the breath fills the body. That sense of oneness can take you all the way to the dimension of the infinitude of consciousness. But to get to that, you've first got to evaluate things to get everything fitting snugly together and well-connected together inside.

I once made the mistake one time, when talking to someone in Thailand, of saying that it's like a dog lying down. I shouldn't have used a dog to make a comparison with the mind in concentration, but I thought it was a good image. The dog lies down, and oops, there's a rock. So he gets up and scratches away the rock. Then he lies down again. Oops, there's a root. Okay, he scratches at the root. And then when everything is smooth, he settles down.

It's the same with the breath. You scratch here, you scratch there, and you finally get everything nice, smoothed out, and comfortable. Then the mind can really settle down and really be at one. It's this scratching around to make things just right and keep them just right: That's the evaluation.

So try to do as precise and observant a job as you can with this evaluation, and the results will just keep getting better and better.