

## *Thinking & Evaluating*

*January 19, 2010*

We're here trying to practice right concentration. And one of the factors of right concentration on the beginning level is thinking. The Pali word *vitakka* is the general word for thinking. It doesn't have any special esoteric meaning. The Buddha didn't come up with a special esoteric word to describe what you're doing when you practice concentration. He used the everyday, normal word for thinking. And it goes together with evaluation, *vicara*. That, too, is the normal everyday word for evaluating something, considering something, investigating something.

The question is sometimes asked, exactly how discursive can this thinking be if it's going to qualify as right concentration? But that's not the real question. the real question is: What kind of thinking do you need to do in order to get the mind to settle down? That's the kind of thinking you have to do. Each person's requirements are going to be different.

So if you sit here with your eyes closed and you find that things settle down very quickly, things get very still, very refined, then the kind of thinking you'll have to do will be very refined as well. In fact, you may not have to do much of it at all. You might just slip into the next level, where you put thinking and evaluating aside. But if you find the mind is not settling down, you've got to think.

Ask yourself: What's wrong?

What attitudes do you have that are preventing you from settling down? Or is there something wrong with the body? Is the body uncomfortable? Do you feel antsy? Do you feel like your energy level's too low? Too high? You want to check things out. Think about what the problem might be, and then evaluate the situation. Sometimes there are issues in your life: Things are not fair, there are issues where it's hard to develop equanimity. So you have to think in ways that will allow you to develop that equanimity.

I noticed, when I was living with Ajahn Fuang, sometimes I'd ask him a Dhamma question and I'd get a one-word, two-word answer. That was it. I realized that what he was doing was giving me the one-word or two-word answer that should cut through the particular problem. These were the quick answers that he had learned to develop over time. Now, it's not the case that you hear the two-word answer and that it's immediately going to work for you. You have to learn how to think your way there. So if you look at the world and find something that's got you upset, try to contemplate in a way that helps you put it aside. You

might be thinking of all the injustices and all the unfairness in the world. Other people get away with all kinds of murder. And here you are trying to practice the Dhamma and it's hard and you feel like you're at a disadvantage. Well, they don't really have a long-term advantage.

I noticed this feeling coming up when I was staying with Ajaan Fuang. A couple of monks in the monastery seemed to be able to do all kinds of things Ajaan Fuang wouldn't let me do. He had me on a tighter leash. There were times when I resented it. It seemed unfair. I would ask to do something they were doing, and he'd say No. They'd go out and go into town, they could do other things that I was not allowed to do at all. I began to realize, however, that he cared more about me. Not that he loved me more than them, but he saw that I had more potential, I guess. Or he was going to give me a better training. He saw that they would not respond to the harsher training, so he let them go. It was his way of showing kindness to me.

It took me a while to realize that. And I must have been difficult to live with until I did. But I had to think my way through to that. He didn't give a lot of explanations. It was a matter of practice and meditation, learning how to think for yourself, figure things out. Which of your attitudes is the unskillful attitude that's going to make it difficult for you to settle down? Often, they're attitudes that you hold to very dearly—especially if they're about issues of fairness, issues about the way things should be.

There's that old story of the hungry ghost up in the rafters of the meditation hall. A group of people have come to present a phaapaa, or kathina and they're sleeping the night before in the meditation hall, lined up. There's a hungry ghost up in the rafters. He looks down at them and they look pretty disorderly. The heads are not in line. So he goes down and he pulls, pulls, pulls, on them until their heads are all in a nice line. Then he gets up into the rafters, looks down, and notices their feet are not in line. So he goes down and pulls, pulls, pulls, pulls on their feet till their feet are in line. Gets up in the rafters and he notices the heads are out of alignment again. So the whole night gets spent this way.

The moral of the story, of course, is there's a lot in the world you cannot straighten out, and the more you try to straighten it out, the more you wear yourself out, tied up in things that don't really accomplish anything. And especially right now, when you're sitting here with your eyes closed, it doesn't accomplish much to get yourself worked up about things. You need a still mind right now. Because it's only when the mind is still that you can begin to see things more clearly, as they're actually happening, for what they actually are.

And use whatever the type of thinking that's needed. If you're suffering from

bouts of lust, there are the traditional meditations on lust. And if the traditional meditation doesn't seem to work with your lust, try to invent a new one that does. Work on the variations. What kind of thinking would actually help you put that lust aside? And what thought in the mind is resisting the idea? Often the techniques will work if you *want* them to work. So you've got to work on the part of the mind that says, "I don't want this to work. I want to stay with the lust." You have to reason with that part.

The same with anger, the same with greed, the same with any of the unskillful thoughts—even the seemingly skillful ones, like equality or justice. For right now, you just put them aside. Even our best values have to have their time and place. When, as right now, you're trying to get the mind quiet, they're not going to be helpful, because they're going to pull away from what you're trying to do here—at least what part of the mind is trying to do.

What this means is that the level of thinking you have to do to get the mind into right concentration depends on the level of disturbance, the types of hindrances you're dealing with, the types of defilements you're dealing with. That's why the thinking has to go along with evaluating.

You check and see where your thinking is leading you: what's working and what's not. When you get the mind finally willing to settle down, then the thinking goes into a subtler level: just thinking about the breath, asking yourself how you perceive the breath. There's the feeling of the breath, there's the perception of the breath, and the thinking about the breath. How do these mental functions interact?

When you perceive the breath as uncomfortable, think about it for a while: What kind of breathing would make the body more comfortable? And if thinking doesn't seem to be getting anywhere, just watch the breath for a while. One of the ways of getting the breath more refined is simply to be very steady in your gaze at the breath.

So the evaluating is always there in the background to help adjust the thinking, so that it's just right for what you need. And as you develop the sense of just right, you find that you can depend on yourself more and more.

It's like getting your balance when you're trying to ride a bicycle. At first, you need the training wheels. You need help. But if you depend on the training wheels all the time, you never develop your own sense of balance. There becomes a point where you have to take them off. In other words, you have to learn how to depend on your own powers of evaluation, to see what works, to see what doesn't work. You may fall down a couple of times, but after a while, as your sense of balance gets more and more steady, more and more reliable, you can take care of yourself.

It requires less and less thought, less and less evaluating. It becomes more and more instinctive.

So the thinking and evaluating may be awkward in the beginning, but over time, as you get a sense of what's working and what's not working, they get more and more refined. And as for when it turns into the kind of thinking and evaluating that's a factor of jhana, the line is not all that clear. But you begin to notice that the mind feels more settled, more refreshed, more at ease with the breath, more at ease in the present moment. There's a quality of ease and refreshment that you can then spread throughout the body. That spreading is also an aspect of thinking and evaluating.

As you work it down to the nerves, down through the blood vessels, out to your toes, out to your fingers, out to every pore, all over the body, the thinking gets more subtle. The rewards get more and more riveting, more and more appealing, absorbing. It may not seem like you're doing any thinking at all. But there's a very subtle level of thinking there, about where to direct the breath, what kind of sensations are best to spread, which ones are not good to spread. Sometimes a moving sensation is what you need to spread. Sometimes a still sensation is what you need. Again, you evaluate it. Your sense of balance grows stronger, your sense of what's needed grows stronger.

Then the next time you meditate, you find that you can't quite get to that same level of refinement right at the beginning. Again, notice that and remember that if you allow yourself to get frustrated by that, it's going to be another problem you have to work through. So get quicker and quicker at putting that sense of frustration aside. Just get down to work, doing whatever level of thinking and evaluating is required, given the situation, given your current state of mind and given the current state of your body. In other words, you do what needs to be done. You think what needs to be thought through.

And in this way, your concentration becomes right as you develop a sense of just right in approaching the breath.