

# *Take Time to Evaluate Your Life*

*January 3, 2015*

One of the benefits of coming out to meditate in a place like this is that it allows you to step back, give yourself some space, give yourself some time, to think about your life. This is especially true in times like this in the holidays, the beginning of the year. You realize it's another year. They're not going to put the 2014 on your tombstone.

Now 2015 is another matter. You don't know how much time you have. What time you *do* have, you want to make the best of it.

So what does it mean to make the best of your time? That's something each of us has to decide. There are a lot of currents in society that would like to decide those questions for you, but if you want to decide the questions for yourself you have to step outside a bit. Go sit under a tree, sit in an empty dwelling, someplace where you're totally cut off from contact with other people. See what you've got, see where you've come from, see where you're going.

Meditation is not always about being in the present moment. One of the few places where the Buddha really emphasizes being aware of the present moment is in a sutta where he goes on to say that once you are aware of what's going on, you have to do your duty with regard to what's going on: There are things you've got to do about it.

So you're not just sitting there being with the present. You're being with the present with a sense of knowing that you're shaping it to some extent, you've shaped it through your past actions, and you're shaping it now with your present actions.

The question is, what's the best way to shape it? The Buddha's recommendation is that you focus on the issue of stress: *dukkha*, also translated as suffering, particularly the kind you're causing yourself.

You would think that everything you do would be for the purpose of pleasure, and often it is, but all too often your actions lead to stress, lead to pain, lead to disappointment.

The question is, why? What can you do now, what can you do as you look at your life, to see this issue more clearly, to figure out where your ignorance lies? As the Buddha says, it's because of our ignorance that we act in ways that are causing us stress.

The Buddha himself saw it. To see these things, you have to get *away* from your normal concerns, your normal responsibilities.

Even if you can't get away all the time, you try to find some spaces of time when you can come out, put all your connectors aside, and try to connect with yourself. What's going on here? Where do you want this to go?

One of the things you can't plan about is specifically what problems are going to come up in the course of the year. But you *can* anticipate that whatever problems do come up are going to require some good qualities of mind. Especially the unexpected problems: You're going to need to be mindful, alert, and have the energy to deal with these things.

This is one of the reasons why meditation is a good preparation for just about

everything, because you develop qualities of mindfulness and alertness.

Mindfulness: You're being mindful to remember to stay with the breath. That's what mindfulness means: holding something in mind. You're remembering that you want to stay here with the breath, and we do that consistently.

Then there's an element of ardency. And you have to be alert to what's going on, to notice when you're sliding off the breath or have totally jumped away from the breath, and then figure out how to get back as quickly and as securely as possible. This means that you have to watch over your meditation.

This is where mindfulness practice slides into concentration practice. The Buddha never made a clear distinction between the two. As mindfulness moves toward concentration, that element of mindfulness turns into directed thought. You remember to stay with one object that you're thinking about.

Your alertness and ardency combine into another factor that the Buddha called evaluation. This is where the concentration also involves a certain amount of discernment. You evaluate the object of your meditation, in this case the breath, so that the mind can be really snug with it, so that it's not likely to want to wander off.

One of the meanings of evaluation is that you evaluate the breath as it's coming in, going out. How does it feel? Could you improve it? And can you improve it without messing it up?

All too often, our efforts to change things involve squeezing this or putting pressure on that. But here we're trying to develop a type of concentration where you can be with something and yet not tighten up around it.

When I was first meditating with Ajaan Fuang, I would hear him say, "Try to catch hold of the breath," and so I would try to tense up around the breath to catch it—and of course you can't catch the breath that way. You just end up being tense.

Then one day I was sitting on a bus in Bangkok and the thought occurred to me: "Why tense up around the breath? The breath isn't something you tense up around. It's a flowing energy. Why not just allow it to go in, go out freely, openly?" And I was able to stay with it and not get tense.

So I went back to Ajaan Fuang and, being a Westerner of course, I told him he was wrong in teaching people to catch the breath. He laughed and said "That's not what I mean by 'catch.'" For him "catch" meant to follow, stick to something. "Stick with the breath, but allow it to have its freedom," he said.

So right here we're learning a new way to evaluate our relationship to the breath. If we see ourselves tensing up around it, realize that this is not what we're supposed to be doing. We're supposed to be concentrating, yet with a strong sense of allowing and not putting too many boundaries around the breath.

The first thing to do is to evaluate how you're settling in with the breath. How does your mind relate to the breath? Is the breath comfortable? How can you change the breath in a way that's going to make it more comfortable, more interesting to stay here, more pleasurable to stay here?

Finally, once you've got a sense of pleasure, you evaluate what you're going to do with it. Ajaan Lee recommends that you allow it to spread throughout the body. This partly means simply allowing this sense of energy to spread as openly as possible. If you see any parts of the body that are tight or feel blocked, what can you do to loosen them up? You don't try to push the breath through them. You loosen them up and, once they're loosened up, the breath can flow on its own.

Then you begin to realize, as you get more and more sensitive to the breath, that there are other levels of breath energy as well, levels of breath that can flow through anything. Without those levels of energy, you wouldn't be able to feel those parts of the body you tensed up.

So there are several layers of breath going on here. As you evaluate the experience of being with the breath, noticing how the different energies in the body relate, you get more and more sensitive to all the layers of things going on in the body and the layers of things going on in your mind.

This is why evaluation is the beginning of discernment. There are five factors of the first jhana that the Canon describes. Ajaan Lee pointed out that three are the causes: directed thought, evaluation and then singleness of preoccupation, which is when your directed thought gets so steady that you're really just with the breath, and nothing else, continually.

At the same time, it means that the breath becomes an object that fills your sense of the body. As you breathe in, it feels like the breath is coming in and out through every pore. All the breath channels are getting connected.

Once you've got those three factors going, you've got, on the one hand, the elements of tranquility in the directed thought and singleness of preoccupation, and the elements of discernment and insight in the evaluation. Because what you're doing is evaluating the amount of disturbance, stress, dis-ease you may be feeling with the breath and looking for the cause.

Sometimes the causes are in the body, sometimes the causes are in the mind. That's what discernment does: It looks for the stress and looks for the causes; tries to comprehend the stress. Once you see what causes are connected with the stress, you can abandon them.

This is also why the Buddha has us focus on the issue of inconstancy, *anicca*. Sometimes that's translated as impermanence, but your direct experience of it is not whether something's going to be permanent or not. The direct experience is: Is it a constant sensation? The level of stress, the level of pleasure in the body, you begin to realize, are not constant: They go up and they go down. And the up and the down have to do with how you're relating to the breath, how you're breathing—lots of different factors that you can investigate right here, right now.

When the level of stress goes up, what did you do? What happened with the breath? What happened to your focus? When the level of stress goes down, what did you do? Try to see these connections.

This is how mindfulness blends into concentration, and concentration blends into the

practices of discernment. They're all part of a single path. This is an important point to remember, especially when you hear mindfulness being defined as just being receptive to whatever comes up and not being judgmental. When you look at the other factors of the path, that definition just doesn't fit in.

Right view is about stress and its causes and comprehending the stress so that you can abandon the cause. To be able to do this, you develop the path. These are things you have to actively do. You pass judgment on something: Is this stress or is this not stress? Which is the cause, which is the effect?

Based on right view you develop right resolve. You want to act in ways, think in ways, that are going to alleviate stress.

Then you practice right speech, right action and right livelihood, so as to eliminate the causes of stress that you're creating in your life and make sure that the way you conduct your life is not burdening other people unnecessarily.

There's right effort, where you try to abandon what's unskillful and try to develop what's skillful.

Right concentration: You're trying to get the mind to settle down and be really, really still.

All of these things are active: There's an abandoning and there's a developing.

Now, if mindfulness were simply accepting whatever's there, it wouldn't fit in with the rest of the path. But the Buddha never defines mindfulness as accepting whatever is there. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind. And it's combined with alertness and ardency.

Everyone seems to assume that his sutta on the establishing on mindfulness is a comprehensive treatment of what mindfulness practice is. But when you look at the questions at the beginning of the sutta, you see that the Buddha sets out the formula for mindfulness and then asks questions only about one part: What does it mean to keep track of something, keep track of the body in and of itself, keep track of the feelings in and of themselves, mind, mental qualities?

As for the rest of the formula—"ardent, alert, mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world": That doesn't get explained at all. People think that because nothing is said about what to do with mind-states that come and go, or feelings as they come and go, the Buddha must not want you to do anything.

But the sutta is part of a larger context. There are other suttas where the Buddha talks about what it means to be mindful about pleasant feelings, what it means to be alert about pleasant feelings, painful feelings, different kinds of pleasant and painful feelings, feelings of the flesh, feelings not of the flesh. He says that there are some that should be encouraged and some that shouldn't be encouraged: both the pleasures and the pains.

Even more clearly with different mind-states: Some mind-states are skillful, some are not. If it's an unskillful mind-state, you want to do whatever you can to get rid of it.

Now sometimes that does mean just watching it for a while to figure it out, in the same way that, back in the 1950's, people studied Russian to figure out the Communists. In other words you study and you learn about it not so that you can accept it as it is, but so that you

can do something about it.

In this way, mindfulness builds on right effort and blends immediately into right concentration.

So it all comes together. These are things you can learn if you give yourself some space, give yourself some time, and get your priorities straight. What are your priorities in life? What do you want out of life?

There's that New Yorker cartoon that shows people trudging along the street with the sticks coming up their backs with a little string hanging down from the end of the stick and a carrot dangling right in front of everybody's noses. Then there was a guy with a sports-carrot driving by on the street. He had the carrot that everyone else was working for.

Are those the carrots you want out of life? A sports-carrot? Or would you like to figure out this problem of why there's unnecessary stress both for yourself and for others? What can you do about it? Give your mind some space and time to think this over.