

Vitakka & Vicara

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Vitakka and *vicara* are two Pali words that mean thinking. They're classified as verbal fabrication. In other words, you engage in these two activities—thinking *of* something first and then thinking *about* it, or directing your thoughts to a topic and then commenting on it—and then you break into speech. Without having had those verbal thoughts in the mind, there would be no external verbal action. They're the mental activities that precede speech.

They're also two of the elements or factors of the first jhana.

Some people say there shouldn't be any thinking in jhana, that when the Buddha was talking about *vitakka* and *vicara* in the context of jhana, he meant something else. But if that were true, he would have been a pretty careless teacher. Usually, when he used his words in a special way, he would take pains to explain the special meaning. But in his descriptions of the first jhana, there's none of that.

In the similes he gives for the four jhanas, the image he gives for *vitakka* and *vicara* in the first jhana is the activity of a bathman. In those days, they didn't have bars of soap. If you were going to take a bath, you needed a bathman to mix soap powder with water to make a kind of dough that you would rub over your body. The bathman would have to knead the water into the dough so that the entire ball of dough would be moist, and yet it wouldn't drip.

This corresponds, when you're in the first jhana, to taking the sense of rapture and pleasure that builds up around the breath and learning to work it all the way through the body, so that the entire body is saturated with rapture and pleasure. You have to direct your thoughts to questions like: Where is the pleasure to begin with? How do you maintain it? How do you work it through the body? Where is it blocked? And how can you work it through those blockages. Those questions count as evaluation.

The Buddha doesn't explain how to work the rapture and pleasure through the body, but Ajaan Lee fills in this blank by framing the issue in terms of the breath energy. You're thinking about the breath and you're evaluating the breath: Where is it comfortable? Where is it not comfortable? If it's not comfortable, what can you do to change it? If it is comfortable, what can you do to maintain it? And then what do you do with that pleasure? How do you get it to spread through the body?

You can think of it going down the spine and out the legs. Going down the center of the front of the body. Going all throughout the head down through the arms. Or sometimes you can think of it coming up. If your back is feeling

weak, think of the energy coming up the spine instead of going down: from the base of the feet on up through the legs up and then up through the back.

This is something you have to evaluate on your own because you're trying to get the mind to stay together with the object: You're trying to get the breath and that sense of pleasure to fill the body. Getting the breath to fill the body is a very good way of allowing rapture and pleasure to saturate the body.

And you want your awareness to fill the body as well. In fact, you want all these three things to come together. This is why these three things—body, feelings, and mind—are the first three frames of reference when you're establishing mindfulness. You want everything to fit together; you want all these three things to fill one another thoroughly.

And then you comment on it some more. That's what the evaluation basically is. You comment on it to yourself to see, "Is this going the way you want, or is it not?" You have to apply these fabrications not only to the breath but also to the mind. What is your mind doing right now? If it's slipping off, is the problem with the breath or with the mind itself? Where is it slipping out to feed? If you find the mind feeding on something that's not good, how do you bring it back to get it to feed on the breath?

This is another activity of directed thought and evaluation. You want to get the mind snug with the object. Sometimes that means making adjustments to the object, sometimes to the mind. It's like getting two pieces of wood to fit together snugly. Sometimes you have to sand this piece of wood, sometimes you have to chip a little something off of that piece of wood, until finally they fit. When they fit together snugly, you can put the thinking aside.

But it's always there waiting in the background. Because as the meditation goes along, when you've settled into a good state of concentration long enough, you want to ask yourself what to do to move on to a more refined level of concentration. Sometimes the opposite happens: The mind swerves off the topic and you need to be able to notice that. You have to learn how to talk yourself into coming back. This is also an activity of verbal fabrication.

This is where the Buddha gets into what he calls the fabrications of exertion, which, in some cases, have to be used to overcome the causes of suffering. As he notes, some of the causes of suffering in the mind require nothing more than that you look at them and you see that they're really not worth going for. As a result, they simply fall to the side. With other causes, though, you can look at them and they just stare right back. There's a part of the mind that's resistant to letting them go, and so they don't fall away so easily. This is where you have to use all three fabrications of exertion: bodily, verbal, and mental.

Verbal fabrication, of course, is directed thought and evaluation. You use this in conjunction with all the other fabrications: working with the breath,

which is bodily fabrication; working with your perceptions, the images and individual words that have power over the mind—which are mental fabrications. And working with feelings of pleasure and pain in the body: Those are mental fabrications as well.

Verbal fabrication, though, is the primary factor that works with the other two. You have to evaluate the situation and ask yourself, when the mind is going for something that's off target, how do you bring it back? With some of the food we feed on, it's easy to see that when you eat this kind of food you get sick. So you tell yourself that it's not really worth it, and that's enough for you to give it up. But with other kinds of food, it's harder. In some cases that's because the effects take a long time to appear. In other cases, you're so used to eating that kind of food every day, so you don't see any connection between how the mind is reacting to an object and how it's connected to the way you're feeding on something.

Like sugar: People who eat sugar every day are pretty used to what it feels like to eat sugar every day and they take it as normal. To realize that it's not normal, that the body doesn't have to feel that way, you have to wean yourself off of the sugar. That requires some thinking in the long-term. What are the long-term results of feeding in this way? And you have to force yourself to give it up. The results of giving it up at first may be unpleasant, but after a while you get to the point where sugar smells bad. Then you realize, "Oh! It really is having a bad effect on the body." But you had to force yourself to get to that point.

So in some cases when you're doing directed thought and evaluation about something that you're obsessed with or something you're holding on to, you have to think about long-term consequences. And be willing to talk to yourself to remind yourself every day—every time you feel tempted to follow that particular line of thought—that its long-term consequences are bad.

There are other kinds of food, though, where you actually see the harm but you don't care. Back when I was teaching at Chiang Mai University, there was a group of us who would get together once a week. We'd fan out through the city of Chiang Mai to get northern Thai food. We knew where they sold the best barbequed chicken, the best *nam phrik ong*, the best *laab myang nya*: all the other really good northern Thai dishes. So we'd fan out and get all the best dishes and then bring them back to a spot to have a picnic. And then, the next day, everyone would get diarrhoea. And then the next week we'd do it all over again.

A lot of things that the mind focuses on and gets obsessed with are just like that. You see the consequences but you don't care. You say, "I'm much more attracted to the taste of northern Thai food. I can put up with the diarrhoea." That's what you think. So in this case you have to really think about the

consequences to see the fact that they really are harmful. That requires extra thinking. You realize you have to contemplate the allure that you find, say, in northern Thai food, and the consequences it's going to have for your body. Is the taste really worth it?

And the part of the mind that says "Yes": You have to question that. Look around for other consequences that you may not be noticing until finally you decide that, No, it's not worth it, and, Yes, you do care.

This is why the Buddha stresses heedfulness so much. You have to learn how to think heedfully. You don't want to expose yourself to dangers because there are some kinds of diarrhoea where the germ that's causing it can get into your liver and have long-term consequences.

I remember meeting someone who'd been to Thailand years before I got there. He had been with the Peace Corps and he got some kind of intestinal bug that had plagued him for five years afterwards. So to wean myself off of northern Thai food, I had to think about him and his intestinal bug, to get to the point where I could say, "Okay. It's not worth it: five years of bad health for just a fleeting taste."

There are other kinds of food where you can't even imagine not eating it. This, again, is where again where directed thought and evaluation come in, to help you to expand your imagination. Years back, there was the book, *Material World*, which had pictures of all the things you might find in an average household in different countries of the world. One of the houses was in Bhutan. The family had an open pit toilet right under the house. And of course, the flies in the pit toilet would buzz up and get on the food that everybody was eating. Everybody had diarrhoea every day and they didn't imagine there was any other way for them to live. It would have taken someone to come in and show them, "Okay, you move the toilet away, close it up, and your health is going to improve."

Sometimes when you find yourself obsessed with something, you have to ask yourself, "Is there some other way of thinking about this? Can you imagine another way of thinking about it?" This is especially important when we have very strong opinions about things. We're sure we're right about them. But then you have to ask yourself, "Okay, holding onto your rightness about that particular opinion: Where does it get you? If it gets you upset, is it worth holding onto? If it gets you involved in arguments, is it worth holding onto?" Sometimes Yes, but a lot of times No. So you have to imagine what it would be like not to hold onto it.

There's a story Ajaan Chah tells about a group of four guys going through a forest and they hear a rooster crow. Three of them put their heads together and say, "Let's say that it's a chicken. See what the other guy says." They tell the other guy that it's a chicken, and he says, "No. Of course not. It's a rooster."

And they say “No. It’s a chicken.” He gets incredulous: “How could a chicken crow like that?” “Well, it has a mouth, doesn’t it?” they say. They go back and forth, back and forth, and the guy who’s convinced that it’s a rooster—and he’s really right—gets really upset about it, to the point where he starts crying. In his case, holding onto his rightness was actually a source of suffering. So in cases like that, you use your directed thought and evaluation to think about, “What am I getting from holding onto these things? And what are the consequences?”

This is especially important as you start meditating. You find that with your increased powers of concentration and your greater time alone, you can get obsessed with things. You can be very right about them and yet you suffer. This is where you have to step back and ask yourself, “Okay. What is this activity that I’m doing? Where is this taking me?” It’s another function of the establishing of mindfulness: looking at the activities of the mind and asking yourself, “Where does this particular activity fit in the framework that the Buddha gives for dealing with skillful and unskillful thoughts?” And “unskillful,” here, doesn’t necessarily mean wrong. You can be very right about something but you can hold onto your rightness in the wrong way. You have to especially be careful when your increased powers of concentration get you more and more obsessed.

So directed thought and evaluation really do mean thinking about things. They’re not just an unfortunate wobbling of the mind, as one teacher once described them. They serve a real purpose in getting the mind into concentration and keeping it in concentration. They also help take the mind to higher levels of concentration, when you use them to analyze a particular level of concentration to see what’s still causing unnecessary stress in that level, so that you can drop the cause. And they help to protect the mind if it slips off and starts getting into what Ven. Ananda the jhana of anger, the jhana of lust, or the jhana of fear. These *are* kinds of jhana, but when you evaluate the effect they’re having on the mind, you realize that they’re not on the right path.

So as you’re practicing concentration, you have to learn to raise questions, i.e., evaluate what you’re doing, what the results are, so that you can peel yourself away from the causes of suffering that are especially attractive: The ones where you’re right, but the rightness doesn’t get you anywhere.

When the Buddha talks about right view, it’s all about what you’re doing that’s causing suffering right now. As for the rightness of issues out in the world, those are put aside. What can you do to put an end to the suffering you’re causing it yourself: That’s what right view is all about. In this way, everything gets brought back inside. Even though in the description of the establishings of mindfulness, the Buddha sometimes talks about being aware of

bodies outside or feelings outside or mind states outside, it's all ultimately meant to reflect back inside.

You see other bodies dying and you realize that what's happening to them reflects back on you: "I too am subject to dying." You see other people when they're greedy, when they're obsessed with fear, when they're angry, and you reflect back on yourself: "What am I like when I do those things? Do I look like that?" You see how ugly it is in other people. How harmful it is. That's how you look, too. In this way, you learn to look at others in a way that gets you to think about yourself in a skillful way, to bring everything back inside.

What this means is that meditation is not always about stopping your thinking. It first requires that you learn how to think properly, so you can get a good perspective on what you're doing that's causing your suffering and how you can put an end to it. That's when thinking is useful.

And when that thinking has brought you to a point where the mind and the body and the feelings of well-being all come together, fill the body, then you can put the thinking aside. But be ready to pick it up again when you need it again, to evaluate your concentration so as to deepen it and to protect it. In this way, directed thought and evaluation are an integral part of the path, bringing together all the elements of the path, including mindfulness, concentration, right view, and right resolve.

So learn how to put your thinking to good use before you think about letting it go.