

Judging Just Right

May 21, 2018

Ajaan Fuang would often make the point that we're practicing not only right concentration, but also just right concentration. In other words, we have to approach this as a skill, because it is possible for the mind to get into really heavy states of concentration where everything blanks out. You have no sense of the body. Nothing is going on at all, and no discernment can arise in that kind of concentration. And of course it's very easy to get the mind into concentration that's too light. So we're approaching this as a skill to make the concentration just right. And it's in making it a skill that our discernment develops.

It's the same with the middle way as a whole. It's very easy to practice in extremes. Sometimes it might be exhausting, but it's easy in the sense that you don't have to do much thinking, just plow into whatever you do. But finding the point of just right requires discernment. And it's going to take time. This is why evaluation is an important part of the practice: learning how to evaluate what questions to ask yourself and how often to ask them.

When you're working with the breath, you don't think about concentration. You don't think about jhana. You think about the breath. Try to explore the breath. What does the breath feel like in the body right now? Try to put aside all the notions you brought to today about what the breath is doing in the body and just notice: How does it actually feel right here and now? And try to stay on top of that "right here and now."

Then you can start asking yourself, "Does it feel good? What would feel better?" And the answers are things you're going to have to come up with yourself, because nobody else can come in and look at your breath. There's no teacher wandering around the room checking up on the results of your work, telling you that you should correct this number or correct that word. You have to come up with your own solution and your own way of measuring what's just right for you right now. That requires trial and error: something a lot of us don't like.

We want to have everything explained right on YouTube, "This is how you do it" with no room for mistakes. But there are a lot of things that YouTube can't tell you. Is your breath good right now? Is this just right? Well, stick with it for a while and then notice the results. Does it feel good? Does it feel right? Does your body feel depleted of energy? Does it feel wired? If so, make adjustments. In this way, you begin to develop your own discernment as to what's actually working for

you, what needs to be changed, what doesn't need to be changed, and how to fine-tune the changes. A sense of just right is an important part of discernment.

There's a sutta where the Buddha talks about the different aspects of discernment. Having a sense of the Dhamma is the part that can be taught in words. What is the Dhamma? What did the Buddha teach? That's something you can learn by reading. All the other aspects are a matter of using your own powers of observation and discernment to figure out what's just right. For instance, having a sense of the meaning of the Dhamma: That doesn't mean just translating the words into other words. The word "meaning," *attha*, also means purpose and benefit. You really understand the Dhamma only when you've actually benefitted from it and you've actually seen what its purpose is. That's something that has to come with practice.

Other aspects include having a sense of yourself, having a sense of the right amount of food to eat and amount of time to sleep, and having a sense of the right time and place for things. People can provide questions for you to ask yourself in these areas, but the useful answers come with your ability to adjust the questions so they're just right for you, and that requires your own discernment. It takes time; takes effort. Keep coming back, coming back, coming back. But it's time well spent because your discernment does grow.

When they talk about developing discernment in the practice, it's not simply a matter of verifying what the Buddha said or borrowing his discernment. You borrow it to begin with. But you try to develop your own discernment because your own discernment is what will actually see.

So as you try to get the mind to settle down, the big questions are: What's getting in the way of it settling down? What's disturbing it right now? And what can you do to get past the disturbance? Then you can ask yourself, Does the body feel too heavy? Does it feel too light? Sometimes you can actually focus on the lightness of the body. Cast around in the body; see if you can find any sensations that feel light and focus on them. See if that lightens things when they're too heavy. Or if you're feeling giddy or light-headed, where in the body is a sensation of solidity, weight? Focus in on that. One of the reasons we have instructions for developing your discernment is that they give you an idea of what to look for, which questions to ask, and also when to ask which questions.

If you find that your concentration is good, then you can start asking the questions of discernment. "How do I understand the way I'm fabricating this state of here right now? And am I fabricating it well? What would be a better fabrication? To what extent can I trust these fabrications?" But when you're trying to get the mind to settle down, those are not the questions to ask. It's:

“What can I do to make it still? Once it’s still, how do I maintain it, to keep it still?”

This is why the Buddha listed only some of his teachings as categorical: in other words, true across the board. In fact, there are only two sets in the whole Canon that he describes as categorical. One is the teaching that unskillful qualities should be abandoned and skillful ones should be developed. The other is the four noble truths. As for other teachings, they have their time and their place. For example, when you’re working on concentration, the questions of things being inconstant, stressful, not-self: Don’t apply them to the concentration. Apply them to the things that would pull you away from concentration, because you’re trying to make the concentration constant, easeful, and under your control. So you have to learn how to use these teachings at the right time, at the right place.

And as far as control goes, that comes from not trying to impose preconceived notions on things, but trying to notice, “How do I get the mind to settle down? How do I get it to *want* to settle down? Can I do it again? Can I do it again?” Look for the causes: the things that attract the mind and then can maintain it. That’s the control not of a control freak, but of someone who’s skilled. And, as you focus on the breath this way, the concentration develops on its own without your having to think about jhana or concentration or other abstractions. Focus on getting really to know the breath. And in the course of doing that, then you can’t help but get to know the mind.

And as for the long arc of your practice, it’s good every now and then to stop and take note. But you don’t want to be evaluating things too frequently because, as the Buddha said, so many times the changes that come in the course of the practice are extremely gradual. You can’t really measure them. Ajaan Lee’s image is of watching a plant grow. We know it’s growing. But can you measure from day to day or from minute to minute how much it’s growing? Well, no. But you come back days later and you can see, “Oh, now it’s grown.” The Buddha’s image is of a hammer whose handle wears down over time. You can’t measure each day how much it’s worn down, but you know it’s getting worn. In the same way, the practice will develop gradually, imperceptibly. If you measure it too often, saying “I’m not getting where I want,” it may be a matter of not having given it enough time. Get back to the breath, get back to the breath. And every month or so, you can ask yourself: How are things going? In that way, you learn to be judicious in how you use your powers of judgment.

It helps if you’ve developed a manual skill, because then you can take that skill as a guide in how you balance the desire for what you want with the knowledge that you have to focus on the causes. And you can’t let your desire get stale. At the

same time, though, you can't let it get so rampant that it gets in the way of everything else. So think about the skills you've developed and how you developed them and try to use the same approach to the meditation. And, over time, your discernment will develop.

Patience is an important quality here. You have to keep doing this over and over and over again and, every now and then, something will occur to you, like a little light bulb going off. It's, "Oh, something I've been doing all along and I haven't noticed and suddenly I noticed it now." Well you wouldn't have noticed it if you hadn't been doing the practice again and again and again.

Ajaan Lee's image for this is of walking along a path every day. Because you walk on it every day, you notice the little things that have changed from day to day. There may be times when you've walked past something many, many times and you haven't noticed it. Then, all of a sudden, there it is. Everything you need to find is right here. It's where the body and the mind meet at the breath, that's where the Buddha gained awakening. So what's the difference between his breath and our breath? Nothing. The difference is in the discernment. His was developed. Ours is still developing. Simply take heart that you're at the right place, going in the right direction.

And it is necessary to have a good teacher. As I was saying this afternoon, when you're playing the piano, for instance, you've heard great performances. You know what they sound like, and so you can compare yours to theirs. But with nibbana, where you haven't seen it, there's no way you can compare where you are with where that's going to be. This is why the Buddha said that it's only at stream-entry that a person becomes independent in the Dhamma and can see where it's going. That puts your powers of judgment on a firm basis. Before that point, they're still going to be wobbly. So try to find somebody you can trust. Get a sense of how they ask questions and how they judge things. And try it on for size. It's through being willing to try, even when you're not sure, that you give yourself some hope in the practice. The people who want everything all laid out for them will never develop the discernment they need or the ingenuity that makes the Dhamma their own.