

# *Take Nothing for Granted*

*January 4, 2020*

The Pali word *samādhī* that we translate as “concentration” in English, is translated into Thai by the phrase, *tang jai man*, which means to set your mind firmly on something. In this case, set your mind on what you’re doing, what the mind is doing. Set your mind on one thing. Give it a purpose.

That’s one of the reasons why we have the chants every evening before the meditation, to remind ourselves of what our purpose is. Otherwise, as you meditate day-in day-out, day-in day-out, you begin to forget why you’re doing it. And if you’ve hit a plateau, you start to expect that nothing’s going to happen. Things get dull and dry.

So you have to renew your vows in the same way they do with marriages sometimes, when they want to remind themselves that this is a relationship that they really want to keep going, and it has a lot of potential. So you have to remind yourself: You’re here for a purpose. The mind *needs* a purpose. That’s how it functions.

As the Buddha said, we fabricate our experience for the sake of having form, feelings, perceptions, fabrications, consciousness, and then we use those things for the sake of happiness. So we have to remember why we’re here. Keep that in the background, and then set your mind on doing what needs to be done to reach to that goal of happiness, of real happiness.

Sometimes you hear about people saying that when the mind gets still then you frame an intention, and things will magically happen in the mind. And it is true that when the mind is still it can be very suggestible. But with really the important things in meditation you can’t simply set you mind say, “Okay, I want awakening tonight” or “I want deep insights tonight.” What you can say is, “I want to focus on the breath. I want to be very sensitive to the breath. I want to make sure that all my conversation in the mind is about the breath and the mind’s relationship to the breath.” You want to set your mind on getting it into concentration.

Remember that the factors of jhana fall into two sorts: those that are causes and those that are results. You can’t focus on the results, although you keep them in the back of your mind. The things you really have to focus attention on are the causes: directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation.

Now, directed thought and evaluation are nothing mysterious or mystical. They’re things you’re doing all the time. To direct your thoughts means you choose a topic to think about. To evaluate means you make comments on it, you ask questions about it. The mind is doing this all the time. It’s simply that now you’ve decided to take those activities and apply them to one thing; the mind’s relationship to the breath.

What can be done to make the mind more amenable to stay with the breath? What can be done to make the breath more comfortable and interesting for the mind?

And then the singleness of preoccupation: You just keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, this one thing.

Of course, the evaluation has a purpose. You want to make the breath comfortable because you want to create a sense of refreshment, a sense of ease for the mind. So, what way of breathing would lead to that sense of refreshment and ease? What way of thinking about the breath would lead to that sense of refreshment and ease? This is where it's useful to perceive the breath as a full-body process, something that can saturate all the nerves. That way, when the sense of ease comes, say, in the middle of the head or the middle of the chest, then you can think of it connecting up to all the nerves in other parts of the body.

Ajaan Lee's image is of connecting electric wires throughout a wilderness so that you have electricity wherever you want it. Once you have sense of well-being at any one spot, you can spread it around, and then try to maintain it. Again, the directed thought and evaluation will help you maintain it by directing you to think about, "How do I perceive of this energy? How do I manipulate the breath so I can maintain this sense of well-being? Where do I settle down? Where do I focus my main attention?" Try to focus it on some of the crossroads of these different channels of breath in the body.

Ajaan Lee lists some of them as the middle of the head, the palate, the base of the throat, the tip of the sternum, the spot just above the navel. Those are the main intersections. There are lots of other minor ones, too. So when you focus on the different spots, what are the different results? The reason why we're getting the mind into concentration is that we want good results. We're trying to develop this sense of well-being so that we can see clearly more and more subtle things going on in the mind.

Now there's a problem. When the sense of well-being comes, we tend to settle in there and just stay. It's like being a government official and you've been given a really comfortable residence to stay in, so that you can do your work in ease. But you forget about the work and just hang out in your nice, new digs. You begin to lose your sense of purpose. So here again, it's important to remember: It's all about seeing what the mind is doing right now.

That's what the four noble truths are all about: actions you're doing in the present moment, some of which are leading to suffering, some of which are leading away from suffering. The Buddha gives you some pointers, but you've got to see for yourself: Exactly what do those pointers point to? What are you doing right now? Where is the craving right now that's leading to suffering? Where's the desire that leads away? You have to learn how to distinguish these things. That gives you something to look for. That gives you another purpose.

The mind *needs* a purpose. Otherwise, it begins to blur out or to start looking for entertainment on the side. So there's the purpose in getting the mind to settle down and there's a purpose in using the sense of well-being, the sense of concentration, to set your mind on getting some understanding about how you're creating suffering, and how you don't have to. This is the purpose. It's what gives meaning to the meditation—just as in our lives in general,

we have to have a sense of purpose, a sense that we're making choices, and our choices have some impact on our experience. And we can learn how to control that. So you're going to control your attention and your intentions to try to understand, "What do I do that's causing suffering?" And here the word "suffering," *dukkha*, can spread from heavy suffering to very light.

This is a problem in the English language. We don't really have a word that corresponds to the full range of *dukkha*. I know some people who say, "Obviously there's suffering when the mind is outside of concentration, but there's no suffering when it's in concentration."

But there is *dukkha*. There's stress, there's disturbance, along with the little movements of the mind that cause little bits of stress and disturbance here and there. You want to be able to see that. Because if you don't see it in the small areas, in the subtle areas, then you're going to be a victim of the big ones. So you want to see, "What am I doing right now, and what's the impact?" And particularly what is the mind doing right now? How is it talking to itself?

There are different kinds of fabrication. Verbal fabrication is the big issue: how you talk to yourself, how you frame issues, and then how you comment on them. Your cravings are expressed in verbalization. Right view, right resolve, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration, all the factors of the path, those are also forms of verbalization.

So, how are you talking to yourself?

In some cases, the conversations can be very subtle—just little whispers here and there. So you want to be able to get the mind still enough to hear the whispering. This, too, gives you a purpose, tries to keep you focused. The question is, can you maintain your focus? Can you maintain your purpose, even as things get very still?

I talked to an anthropologist years back. He talked about how modern-day anthropologists, when they study a tribe, try to master all the different skills that the people of the tribe have mastered so that they can get an inside feel for the culture of the tribe. But one skill they found they had real trouble mastering is hunting, because hunting requires a lot of mental powers: concentration, a purposeful focus, alertness, and mindfulness, remembering why you're there, so that as the mind gets still it doesn't forget, doesn't get drowsy. You've got to learn how to maintain this balance—stillness and alertness together—and keep them purposeful. When you develop the same qualities in your meditation in the same way, you're sure to bag your insights.

You can't set your mind on saying, "Tonight I'm going to get an insight," just as the hunter can't say, "Tonight I'm going to get a particular animal." But you can say, "I'm going to try to get the causes in line and maintain as consistent an alertness as I can." In this case, the verbal fabrication is there to encourage you, but at the same time it, itself, becomes an object of inquiry.

This mind talking to itself: Who is it talking to? Who's doing the talking? Why does there have to be talking? There's a little bit of talking required to get the mind to settle down and

then all you need is perception, mental fabrication, to keep you going. But then little comments will come in, here and there. Why? What are they doing? Who's talking to whom? Why is there this messaging system going on in the mind?

It's learning how to ask questions like this that you take things apart. Your way of building up worlds of experience, your way of building up your own sense of your identity, comes out of little building blocks like this. If you don't see these things as individual building blocks, you're just going to take them for granted.

That's what the lesson of all this is, is: If you want to gain awakening, you have to learn not to take anything for granted. Don't take the breath for granted, don't take the body for granted, don't take your concentration or your perceptions or your insights for granted. They're all choices. Some of them skillful; some of them not. And you want to get the mind still enough, and sensitive enough, so it can see the little choices out of which the big ones are made. That's when the insights get really interesting.

So, set your mind on not taking the meditation for granted, and see where it'll lead you.