

Evaluation

July 21, 2021

You read the images for the four *jhānas*, and you notice that there's only one in which someone is actually doing some work. It's in the image for the first *jhāna*, with the bathman. He would take a soap powder, which in those days they used instead of a bar of soap, he'd mix it with water, and make it into a kind of dough, which you would then rub over your body. The bathman would have to prepare it. He'd mix the water with the powder and get it so that it was just right, not too much water, not too little: enough to moisturize everything in the powder, but not so much that the water would drip and run out.

This is the image for the activity of directed thought and evaluation, which do the work in the meditation. Ajaan Lee calls them your concentration work.

The standard description of *jhāna* talks about a sense of rapture or refreshment and pleasure, born of withdrawal—in which you've withdrawn your thoughts from sensual issues, and from unskillful mental states: Just the fact that you're withdrawn from them gives a sense of pleasure. You're not a slave to those things right now. You're able to get your head up a little bit above water.

And there's a sense of ease. It starts out perhaps as a mental ease, but as the Buddha says in the passage explaining the image, you then take that sense of ease—along with the sense of rapture or fullness—and you work it through the body. This is where you need your evaluation, because you need to evaluate how to make the most out of this sense of pleasure, this sense of fullness.

This requires looking at the way you breathe, and also how you think of the breath energy in the body. Thinking of the breath channels going through the body makes it a lot easier for the sense of ease to flow. So you evaluate the breath, you evaluate your perceptions, and you make adjustments. Then you evaluate the results. This is the work.

This ability to step back and watch what you're doing is going to be an important part of the meditation. It's the beginning of discernment, as Ajaan Lee points out. Here in the beginning stages, you're devoting it to creating a sense of

well-being as much as you can—because we need this well-being on the path. It's our food.

If the mind doesn't have this food, it's going to go back and nibble off its old sensual pleasures. If there's just a mental pleasure or just a mental rapture, it's not going to have the power it has when you can get it down into the body. So you work on opening up your sense of the body to let it in.

Try to dissolve away any patterns of tension, and then coordinate the body with the breath. Get more and more sensitive to the different kinds of energy you've got in here so that you can use them. You're trying to get everything to settle in together, so that ultimately the mind is really happy to be here. You can put down the activity of directed thought and evaluation, and just be one with the sensation of the breathing coming in, going out.

The image here is of a lake with a spring welling up at the bottom of the lake. There's no more work. The spring wells up through the water of the lake and does it all very naturally. There's no effort, no thought. That's because you've cleared out all the obstacles, cleared out all the obstructions, and things can flow on their own.

It's like building a road through an area that's never had a road before. Once it's there, you don't have to push people out into the road. They'll use the road once it's open. In the same way, your job with directed thought and evaluation is to open things up inside. When they're open and they're connected, then you can drop that activity for the time being and just be with the breath. The breath, together with the pleasure and rapture, will flow on its own.

Now, you're going to have to pick that evaluating activity up again when you want to start analyzing what's going on. This is more and more directly the activity of discernment. After you've got the mind settled in and things are going well, you want to ask yourself, "What still needs to be done? What still is not quite right? What still is lacking? What are you doing that's adding unnecessary stress or a burden on the mind right now?" The best way to see that is to watch for inconstancy. The level of stress goes up; the level of stress goes down. What did you do?

When you can catch that, you can let whatever it is go, and you go to a deeper

level of concentration. In the meantime, though, you want to watch and make sure that nothing's going to come in and destroy your concentration. This is where that level of meta-cognition has to stay going, even when you're not involved in so much directed thought and evaluation. You still have to watch over what you've got, because when distracting thoughts come, they come in little forms at first.

As we were saying this afternoon, sometimes there's just a stirring in the body someplace, or sometimes there will be a little whispering voice that comes in and goes away. "Wouldn't it be nice to think about x ," and then it's gone. "How about thinking about x ," then it's gone.

If there's a lapse in your mindfulness, a lapse in your powers of observation, that's when you go. But it's not as if things hadn't been already set up. They had been set up. It's just that you weren't paying attention. But if you do pay attention—you have this ability to reflect on what you're doing while you're doing it—then you can see, "Oh, here's a little stirring." You can zap it, breathe right through it, and that disperses the energy that would have turned into a thought.

So watch over what you're doing. Protect what you're doing. Even at times when you're not engaged in very active directed thought and evaluation, just maintain this sense of a separate observer, just a little bit away from the object of concentration so that it doesn't destroy the concentration. Without it, you'd lose control.

Ajaan Fuang had a student one time who was a teacher in a very exclusive private school in Bangkok. She had extremely strong powers of concentration but no powers of observation. She'd get herself into a state and couldn't get herself out. She had to sit with Ajaan Fuang, and he would tell her, "*Okay, now you do this; now you do that, focus here, focus there. Drop this. Drop that.*" She couldn't think of it on her own because she was so totally focused on the one object.

We found out later that she would visualize the different elements in the body—with breath, it was an image of wind—and she would just stare at that image of wind. That's a case of concentration with no powers of observation, no ability to reflect. It was solid, it was very still, but not the kind of concentration that was going to lead to discernment. You have to have the ability to step back a little bit

and watch. That's where the discernment comes from.

So from the very beginning, you're learning how to use your discernment and how to get the mind willing to stay here. Think about the Buddha's explanation of one of the aspects of discernment, which is seeing that there's something you don't like to do but you can talk yourself into doing it. Or seeing something that you do like to do, but it's going to be unskillful, and you can talk yourself out of it. In this particular case, staying with the breath may not be all that attractive, but when you can make it comfortable, when you can make it saturate the body with a sense of well-being, that's a sign of discernment. You know how to use your breath in order to catch your mind—and then to use that ability to observe and experiment, and observe some more and experiment some more.

That's what gets you into deeper concentration. That's what helps you develop discernment as you're doing the concentration. It's the kind of discernment that ultimately can get you away from your attachment to the concentration altogether, but first you use your discernment to get yourself attached, because this is a good attachment. When you're well attached to the breath, well attached to the sense of well-being in the body, it makes it a lot easier to step back from your other attachments, the less skillful ones.

So learn how to think strategically. I know people who ask, "How can I practice concentration without clinging?" because they've been told of the dangers of clinging to concentration. You *have* to cling because the mind has this tendency to cling already, and before you're going to completely train it out of that tendency, you have to learn how to make skillful use of it. This is a sign of discernment.

Think of Venerable Ānanda. As the Buddha said, even when he wasn't an arahant, still he was awfully discerning. It's in suttas attributed to him that we learn about the uses of desire on the path, the uses of conceit, the uses of craving. As Ajaan Lee would say, this is the sign of a person of wisdom and discernment—someone with the ability to get good use out of anything.

So even though attachment may be part of the problem, you can make it part of the solution. Ajaan Lee has that great passage where he says, "To take good things and make them good doesn't require much discernment. To take things

that are not good and make them good: That's a sign of real discernment."

So you've got this inconstant breath, this inconstant mind, but you put them together in situations where you can make them more constant, more reliable, more pleasurable, more under your control. You use your desire for stillness, you use your desire for pleasure, to wean yourself off of unskillful desires and unskillful pleasures by creating a real sense of well-being right here.

That forms the foundation for deeper and deeper levels of concentration, and they in turn allow you to watch the process of fabrication. This way, you can see areas in which you've been adding unnecessary stress to what's going on and you can learn how to stop.

So always remember this factor of evaluation. It's the beginning of discernment. If you learn how to use it well, your discernment will grow a lot sharper. After all, evaluation is making a value judgment, and the activity of discernment, as it gets deeper and deeper in the path, is also a value judgment as to what's worth doing what's not, what's worth hanging on to what's not. It's just that it gets more and more refined.