

## *To Sustain Your Practice*

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Ajaan Fuang used to comment that there were three stages to concentration. First is learning how to do it. Second is learning how to maintain it, and third is learning how to put it to use.

You can hear the instructions and focus on the breath—and anybody can focus on the breath. What makes the difference is the maintaining. How do you stick with it? This question applies not only to concentration practice, but also to the practice as a whole. We live in an environment that's not all that friendly toward Dhamma practice. It's almost as if we're in a Moon colony. Step outside of the Moon colony and you explode. So we have to learn how to nourish our practice as best we can in difficult situations—and to some extent, this is true wherever you go.

True practice of the Dhamma is countercultural even in Buddhist countries. There's more support there, there's more understanding, but Buddhist countries have also developed their ways of resisting the practice. So it's not as if it's easy for anyone.

Fortunately, the Buddha gave some instructions in how to maintain your practice. He said there are two important things, internally and externally. The external quality most helpful for gaining your first taste of awakening is what he calls admirable friendship. The internal quality is appropriate attention.

Admirable friendship means finding someone who's an admirable friend, but also the fact that you enter into an admirable friendship with that person. An admirable friend is recognized by four qualities. The first is that this person is a person of conviction, really believes in the Buddha's awakening. What does that mean? How is that relevant to you? Well, basically, the Buddha gained awakening through his own efforts, and one of the things he awakened to was the nature of human effort, what it can do. To have conviction in the Buddha's awakening is to be convinced that you can make a difference through your own actions.

The basic principle is that if you act on skillful intentions, you'll get good results. You act on unskillful intentions, you get bad results. Obviously, someone who really believes this is someone you can trust. People who believe that their actions don't make any difference, that it doesn't matter what you do, that there is no good or evil—you can't trust people like that. So

you start with someone who believes in the principle that your actions really do make a difference, and that it's really important how you choose which intentions to act on.

The second quality is virtue. When people are really serious about their intentions, they want to make sure that they act in a way that doesn't harm anybody. This is expressed in the five precepts: no killing, no stealing, no illicit sex, no lying, no taking of intoxicants.

The third quality is generosity. This means being generous with material things, but also being generous with the Dhamma, being generous with your time, being generous with your knowledge, being generous with your energy, being generous with your forgiveness.

The fourth thing to look for is for someone who's wise and discerning, and particularly who really discerns why we suffer and how we can put an end to that suffering.

Now, obviously, these characteristics are found best in someone who's gained the first taste of awakening. Their conviction in the Buddha has been confirmed. Their discernment into the problem of suffering has finally taken root, and based on both of those qualities, they're generous and virtuous.

To enter into admirable friendship with this sort of person means not only that you look for someone who has these qualities, but that you also want to look for someone who encourages other people to develop these qualities. Of course, they'll want to encourage you, and then you try to emulate those qualities yourself. You become a person of conviction, generosity, virtue, and discernment, too. That's how this external quality helps you maintain your energy on the path.

Of these qualities, conviction is probably the most important. If you're not convinced that the Buddha was really awakened, it's very easy to start thinking, "Well, maybe he was just somebody who had some interesting ideas 2,600 years ago, but there are a lot of other people who have interesting ideas, too." You can start wandering around, and the path begins to lose a lot of its fervor, lose a lot of its energy. Or you might say, "Well, that was 2,600 years ago. How does that apply now? We live in a different environment, in a different world." But you have to remember, greed, aversion, and delusion then, and greed, aversion, and delusion now are the same sorts of things. The good qualities of the path to fight those defilements are also the same sorts of things.

There are certain things that don't change, and the Buddha was able to see these things clearly and map them all out. So in terms of looking for the question of what's skillful and what's not, we don't have to keep re-inventing the Dhamma wheel all the time. We've got some guidance, and then, of course, the Buddha teaches us to develop our own discernment so

that in the areas where he doesn't give guidance, we can take the basic principles and learn how to apply them ourselves, to learn from our mistakes. That way, our good intentions become more and more skillful intentions, based not only on wanting to do something good, but also understanding what actually is effective, what actually is helpful, what actually is harmless.

This gets into the most useful internal quality, which is what the Buddha calls appropriate attention. This means basically looking at things in terms of what's skillful and what's not, and what you can do to develop what's skillful and to abandon what's not. This principle right there covers the entire Dhamma.

There was a lay follower of the Buddha who was asked by some sectarians one time, "What does this Buddha of yours teach? Does he teach that the universe is eternal or not eternal?" And the layperson said, "Well, no, he didn't answer that question." "How about if it's finite or infinite?" "No, he didn't answer that one, either." "Is the soul the same thing as the body? Is it something different from the body?" "No, he didn't answer that one either." They went down the list of what were the hot topics of that time, and in every case, "No, the Buddha doesn't address those issues."

So they said, "Then this Buddha of yours is a nihilist. he doesn't teach anything." And the lay person said, "No, that's not true. He teaches what's skillful and what's unskillful. He teaches to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful." That was the end of that conversation.

The layperson went to see the Buddha, and the Buddha confirmed that, yes, that was the right thing to say in a situation like that. So appropriate attention means paying attention to what you're doing while at the same time keeping that question in mind: "What's skillful, what's unskillful? What should I do if I'm inclined to do something unskillful? What can I do to learn how to do what's skillful? When I'm already doing something skillful, how can I maintain it?" You can develop this way of looking at things until it turns into the four noble truths.

Unskillful action would be the three types of craving. The results of unskillful actions would be suffering. Skillful actions would be the noble eightfold path. The results will be you put an end to suffering by putting an end to craving. So learning how to look at your life in those terms is appropriate attention. That's what's going to help you gain awakening.

Now, the problem is that we look at our lives in so many other terms. Our jobs require that we look at things in different ways. Our family life, members of the family demand that we look at things in different ways, so you have to learn how to talk to yourself, to remind yourself, that these are your real values.

It's just that there's a lot in the path that doesn't show its results right away, which is why the mind can be very easily waylaid by the views and the opinions of the world. This is where those three types of fabrication that we've been talking about come in. One is learning how to breathe in a comfortable way. That gives you a sense of well-being, being on the path. Viscerally, it feels good. You may be in difficult situations, but you can learn how to breathe in a way that doesn't add to the difficulty and that keeps reminding you, okay, where did you learn this technique? Well, you learned it from the Buddha. Okay, remember the other things the Buddha taught, and use those lessons to talk to yourself, to address issues in relationship to the Dhamma.

This is where the issue of doubt comes in—the healthy doubt that wants to know. The Buddha talks about right concentration. What is right concentration like? He talks about the stages of noble attainments. What are those like? There are so many other things that the world would like us to be curious about, and this is what this kind of doubt is. The doubt that wants to know is basically curiosity.

The world wants you to be curious about the things they have to sell us, or whatever they want to get out of us, but the Buddha wants you to be curious about things that are for your own good. He wants you to be curious about why it is that we all want happiness and yet we do things again and again and again that create suffering. Where are we blind? What can we do to put an end to that blindness? Those questions are in line with the four noble truths.

Then there are the perceptions you hold in mind.

The world again would have us hold in mind certain perceptions—that success in life means getting ahead, getting a lot of money, getting status—but the Buddha called these simply the ways of the world. There's gain and there's loss; there's status, loss of status; praise, criticism; pleasure and pain. The world wants us to thirst after these things—the gain, the status, the praise, and the physical pleasures—but you can't have these positive ones without having the negative ones as well. There's going to be material loss; there's going to be loss of status; there's going to be criticism; there's going to be pain. What do you do in cases like that? The world pretty much abandons you. They say, "Well, look for the good things," and if you're suffering, sometimes, they say, "Well, the problem is you," or "Maybe it doesn't matter."

There are all kinds of ways that the world has of trying to disguise the fact that they're selling you only half of reality, so you have to learn how to hold this perception in mind: Wherever there's gain, there's going to be loss; wherever there's status, there's going to be loss of status. Why devote your life to pursuing these things?

Another good perception to hold in mind—here we’re talking about mental fabrication—is simply the fact that where there’s karma, there’s also rebirth. Wherever there’s craving, there’s going to be rebirth. Where do you want to go? Think of the image of the king. The story goes that a king met up with a young monk one day, and he’d known this young monk back when the young monk was still a layperson. He was the son of a wealthy family in the city where the king was ruling. He was curious, “Why would you want to ordain? People usually ordain because they’ve lost their relatives, they’ve lost their wealth, they’ve lost their health. Basically, they’ve ended up in a pretty miserable situation, so the only out is to ordain. Yet here you are. You’re wealthy, you’re healthy, your family is still alive. Why would you ordain?”

The monk responded with the four Dhamma summaries that we chanted last night: The world is swept away, it does not endure; it offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge; the world has nothing of its own, one has to pass on, leaving everything behind; and yet, the world is insufficient and sensual slave to craving.

The first three of those Dhamma summaries relate to the teachings on inconstancy, stress, and not-self, or aging, illness, and death. You see this clearly in the examples the young monk gives to explain the Dhamma summaries to the king.

First, in terms of inconstancy or aging: He asks the king, “When you were young, were you strong?” The king says, “Yes, I was so strong, I couldn’t see anyone else who was my equal in strength.” “How about now?” “Now? No, I’m 80 years old, and sometimes I mean to put my foot in one place, and it goes someplace else.” The monk said, “That’s what I mean: The world is swept away.”

As for the world having no one in charge, of course, the king felt he was in charge, but the young monk pointed out to him, “When you’re sick, you’ve got an illness that sends pain shooting through your body, and your courtiers are gathered around, wondering, ‘Is this the time he’s going to die? Is this the time he’s going to die?’ Can you order them to take out part of that pain and share it so that you don’t have to feel so much?” Well, No, the king had to feel all that pain all on his own. He certainly wasn’t in charge of that. That’s the teaching on stress and illness.

And finally, a teaching on death and not-self. The monk had said the world has nothing on its own, and the king said, “Wait a minute, I’ve got storerooms filled with gold and silver, all the wealth I could want.” But the young monk asked, “When you die, can you take it with you?” “Well, no, I have to leave it all behind, and go along in terms of my karma.”

So, here he’s got the king reflecting on aging, illness, death, inconstancy, stress, not-self.

Then he gets to the fourth Dhamma summary: The world is insufficient, insatiable, a slave to craving. The young monk asks him, “Suppose there were a kingdom to the east, with lots of wealth, all sorts of things you could gain and their army is weak. Would you attack them?” The king says, “Yes, of course.” “How about a kingdom to the south?” “Yup, I’d go there for that one, too.” “To the west?” “Yup.” “To the north?” “Yup.” “How about on the other side of the ocean?” “Yup.” Here the king has been reflecting on aging, illness, death, how he can’t take anything with him, he’s 80 years old, but he’d still be willing to attack and kill for the sake of more.

This is our problem. We keep coming back. We suffer aging, illness, and death again and again and again, and yet we don’t have enough of it. If you hold that perception in mind, it makes it a lot easier to look at the baits of the world—gain, status, praise, physical pleasures—and realize they’re not worth the effort. The relationships you have with other people have their good side, but they also have their bad side, and either way, you get separated, and yet you keep going back for the same thing, again and again and again. If you hold in mind your perception, “Well, this is my one chance to get this whatever,” it’s going to be hard to resist. But if you realize, “Okay, I’ve been through this many, many times,” that makes it easier to resist the desire to go back for more. As the Buddha said, if you see someone, wealthy, with all the possible power and other things that people crave, remind yourself, you’ve been there, and you’ve lost it now.

Ajaan Fuang once said that when you find yourself really pining after something—especially sensory pleasure—tell yourself the reason you’re pining for it is that you used to have it, you miss it, and you want it again. Well, of course, think about that: If you get it again, you’re going to lose it again. That’s a good perception to hold in mind.

So when you think about the perceptions that the world would have you follow, remind yourself that appropriate attention teaches you other perceptions. When you see somebody who’s really poor, remind yourself: You’ve been there, too. Do you want to come back to that?

The problem is, as the Buddha said, we’ve had these things in the past and we miss them, so there’s this sense of nostalgia. The Pali term, *anālayo*, no nostalgia, is an important part of letting go of the cause of suffering, because you learn not to have any nostalgia for your old cravings. As long as there’s nostalgia, you still have to fight those perceptions with the perceptions that the Buddha recommends.

So, here again, you get to learn how to use these three kinds of fabrication: the way you breathe, the way you talk to yourself, the perceptions you hold in mind, feelings of well-being

that you can develop, both through the way you breathe and through your perceptions, and through the encouragement you give yourself as you talk to yourself.

This is how you develop appropriate attention, the internal quality that helps keep you on the path. It's from admirable friends that we learn about and develop appropriate attention inside, and it's through appropriate attention that we have standards for recognizing admirable friends and following their example. In this way, these two qualities sustain each other as they help to sustain us. This is why we try to have communities of people to get together, practice together, encourage one another for each person's true well-being. It's hard to find communities like that in the world. So, when you find one, make the most of it. That's how you sustain yourself on the path. That's how you maintain the path so that you can put it to use to get rid of your own suffering.

So the maintaining is the hard work, but it's good work, and all those who've devoted themselves to it say that it's worth all the effort. The Buddha himself one time said, suppose someone would make a deal with you that they would spear you with a hundred spears in the morning, a hundred spears at noon, and a hundred spears in the evening—three hundred spears a day—every day for a hundred years, but at the very end, you would be guaranteed awakening. If there were such a deal that could be offered, he said, it would be a good deal to take—and when you did gain awakening, you wouldn't think that you'd gained it with pain. The experience of the deathless is that overwhelming, that special.

So, do what you can to maintain the path. Nobody's asking you to get speared. There will be difficulties, of course, but learn to look for admirable friends, enter into admirable friendship, and develop appropriate attention—the kind of attention to things that helps sustain you on the path, to keep reminding you that this is a good path to be on and it leads to something even better. Those are the two qualities that will see you through.