

Evaluation

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Ajaan Lee had some good insights into concentration practice, one of which was that the first level of right concentration, the first jhana, has two types of factors. On the one hand, you have the causes, which are directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation. On the other hand, there are the results: pleasure and rapture—and the word “rapture” can be translated in lots of ways, including “refreshment” and “fullness.”

He also noted that, of the causal factors, directed thought and singleness of preoccupation are on the tranquility or concentration side. Evaluation is on the discernment side. This falls in line with what the Buddha said about how you nourish the Dhamma by committing yourself to it and then reflecting on what you’ve done.

The commitment there is in directed thought and singleness of preoccupation: focusing your mind solely on the breath and trying to keep it there, not letting anything else come in to pull your awareness away. When we talk about singleness of preoccupation, it means two things: One, it’s the one thing you focus on. And two, you’re trying to make that one thing fill your awareness.

This is where the evaluation comes in. How do you breathe in a way that feels good throughout the body? Think of the breath as a whole-body process. Sometimes you hear it said that you have to focus on the spot right under the nose, where you feel the air coming in and going out. Well, that’s a tactile sensation. The Buddha described the breath as an aspect of one of the elements in the body itself, one of the properties of the body, and that can be felt anywhere in the body.

The more sensitive you are to it, the more you realize that each time you breathe in and breathe out, everything down to the spaces between the fingers and toes has something to do with the in-and-out breath. There are parts of the body that you instinctively tense up, even if it’s just a little bit as you breathe in. Or especially when you’re trying to focus on the breath, you tend to make a little marker between the in-breath and the out-breath, a bit of tension—all of which is unnecessary. If you want to make the breath comfortable enough to give rise to rapture and pleasure, you can’t go around squeezing it.

Think of the breath breathing the breath, the in-breath flowing into the out-breath, the out-breath flowing into the in-breath, filling the whole body. That’s when you have real singleness of preoccupation, where the one thing you’re

focused on fills your awareness. And your awareness is broad. All the analogies the Buddha gives for right concentration have to do with full-body awareness: the bathman kneading water into his entire lump of bath dough; the spring filling the all waters of the lake with cool water; the lotuses sitting in a cool, still pond, with the water moistening them from the tips of the flowers down to the tips of the roots; and the man sitting with a white cloth covering his entire body. These are all images of fullness, broad awareness filling the body with that sense of ease.

But to get there, you've got to start with the evaluation. Sometimes you hear that the evaluation is an unfortunate wavering or wobbling in the concentration as you haven't quite gotten your balance yet. But it actually performs an important and necessary function. To get the mind to settle down snugly with the breath, you have to survey what's going on.

This is part of the reflection: Is the mind snug with the breath? Is the breath snug with the mind? Are you ready to settle down? Ajaan Lee emphasizes the evaluation of the breath, but you also have to evaluate the state of your mind: Is it ready to settle down? Does it have issues it's got to put aside first before it can settle down? If so, you got to deal with other thoughts, other topics, for the time being, to get the mind in the right mood to settle down, to feel at ease right here.

There's one sutta where the Buddha talks about trying to settle down with the breath, and there's a fever in the body or a fever in the mind. In other words, something is not quite right. So he recommends thinking about an inspiring topic. It could be recollection of the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, recollection of your own generosity, your own virtue, even recollection of the devas.

With the recollection of the devas, it's not simply thinking about the fact that there *are* devas, but thinking more about the qualities that make them devas. You realize you've got those qualities in yourself: conviction, virtue, generosity, learning the Dhamma, discernment. They may not be fully developed, but they're there.

Or you can think thoughts of goodwill. This is especially useful to pull you out of the issues you have with people around you, because when the Buddha has you develop goodwill, it's not just for a narrow range of people. It's for everybody, everywhere. Spreading your mind in all directions like that can open it up.

You think about all the beings everywhere in all directions, and that reminds you of the Buddha's vision on the night of his awakening, when he saw beings everywhere. They were dying and being reborn over and over and over again. That image helps to flesh out your thoughts of goodwill. You begin to see that the

issues of this particular lifetime are very small compared to all the issues that have gone on for all the many lifetimes, for all the beings of the world.

So if a particular issue seems oppressive, remind yourself: There have been issues that were a lot more oppressive, either in your lifetimes or the lifetimes of others. Stupid things you've done in this lifetime—well, everybody's done stupid things. The good things you've done in this lifetime, the way you've been mistreated in this lifetime—well, it's happened to everybody. Remembering that can take away some of the sting, which is a thorn in the mind. Goodwill gives rise to *samvega*. And from *samvega*, you're very close to developing heedfulness. Then, from heedfulness, you can get back to the present moment, with your mind ready to settle down.

Now, this may take a little time or it may take a lot of time. The important thing is that you use your powers of evaluation to help get the mind to settle down, because you're going to exercise them in that way. This is why I say it's not just an unfortunate wobbling or wavering in your meditation. It's exercising your discernment, because you're going to be needing it again and again and again, both to get the mind into concentration and then to move beyond concentration. And to get *beyond* concentration, it's going to require that you've exercised it *with* the concentration.

So look at what you've got right here, right now. You've got these potentials in the body. Where is that potential for ease? Where is the potential for rapture right now? It's there. What are you doing that's blocking it? What are you doing that's running roughshod over it? Look for that.

The mind itself has a potential for stillness. The Buddha mentions this in his descriptions of the factors for awakening. There is a potential for calm. There is a potential for concentration, stillness in the mind. Where is it right now? Can you put those good potentials together? Look carefully at what you've got. Open up your mind about what's possible, given what you've got.

It's like going to the kitchen and for all your lifetime, you've been doing nothing but frying eggs. Then someone comes and teaches you to do other things with eggs as well. It's not that the eggs going into the soufflé are different from the eggs going into fried eggs. They're the same eggs. It's just that you've learned the skills to bring out other potentials.

Well, it's the same with your mind—and with your body. Sit here watching your breath and you'll see: Where's the potential for ease? Where's the potential for rapture or refreshment? It's there. Look for it. Where in your mind is the potential for stillness? It's there.

When you think in these ways, you find that the breath and the mind can get together in a more and more snug way, feeling at ease with each other. And the concentration is not forced. It becomes more and more a natural state of mind, a state where the mind is happy to be here—not just because of the pleasure of the body, but also happy in its skill, knowing how to deal with whatever's coming up in the body, whatever's coming up in the mind, and having a sense of well-being in being on the path.