

## *Evaluating the Practice*

*November 27, 2013*

Ajaan Lee had a lot of really helpful observations on concentration practice. The first had to do with the factors of the first jhana: that directed thought, evaluation, and singleness of preoccupation are the causes. Those are the things you do. When you do them well, they give rise to the other two factors: pleasure and a sense of fullness, rapture. It's all too easy, if you read the description of five factors, to think that you can just throw the five factors together. But it doesn't work that way. Some of the factors are causes; some are results.

Ajaan Lee also taught the fact that evaluation is just that—evaluation: That, too, is an important observation. Some of the commentaries say that directed thought is when you bring the mind to an object, and then *vicāra* is just keeping it there. But the word *vicāra* in Pali—and its derivative, *wi-jaan* in Thai—both mean evaluation. Ajaan Lee really stressed the fact that you *are* evaluating. It's a wisdom factor, a discernment factor, and it's really important in the practice: looking at what you're doing and learning how to evaluate it, trying to figure out what's wrong and what can be corrected. It's through developing this factor that you become a more and more reliable meditator, and also a more reliable friend to yourself. You can look after yourself with more ease.

Instead of just running with whatever comes into the mind, you learn to step back and ask yourself, "What am I doing? What are the results of what I'm doing? Where could I do it better?" It's in that ability to observe your own actions that you begin to develop some discernment of your own. You can learn what's stated in the texts about what discernment is and the things that discerning people see, but real discernment is when you're able to see them in your own mind.

This is how you do it: You watch yourself in action. And this, of course, starts with the Buddha's instructions to Rahula. I know a lot of people who've commented they really wished that their parents had been like the Buddha, teaching them the way the Buddha taught Rahula. He's basically saying to try to avoid mistakes, but if you find that you've made a mistake, this is what you do so you don't have to make it again—probably some of the most valuable advice you can get.

If you're planning to do something, ask yourself, "What have been the results of my doing this in the past?" If doing it led to harm, you say, "Nah, I don't want to do that again." That's a skillful decision.

The Buddha here is teaching compassion. But he's also teaching you to remember your actions. It's a training in mindfulness and the ability to see connections: "I did  $x$ , and  $y$  happened as a result." We don't always see those connections, either because we don't want to see, or because the cause and the effect were separated by time and we got distracted in the meantime. But here, the Buddha's saying to look carefully at what you're doing and the results of what you're doing so that you can learn from it.

But if contemplating an action you don't see that it's going to cause any trouble, go ahead and try it. Or if you're not sure, if it's something new you've never done before, say, "Well, this is an experiment." But then you watch while you're doing it: What kind of results are you getting right away? If you see that the action is causing harm, you stop. If you don't see any harm, you can continue with it.

Then when you're done, you look back on the long-term results. That, right there, teaches you a very important principle about causality. Some causes have an effect immediately, some have an effect over time, and sometimes they have both. You want to learn how to take advantage of that.

It's interesting that the Buddha, when he gave the most condensed explanation of his awakening, expressed it as a principle of causality—the bare bones of the principle. Then he spent 45 years working out the implications of the principle. One of the most important implications is that you can learn from your mistakes so that you don't have to repeat them, but it does require that you be mindful and alert so you know what you're doing. You're not just doing things on automatic pilot. You're alert to what you're doing; you notice what you're doing. Then you remember when you see pleasure or pain coming up: "Okay, what is this connected with? What did I do that caused this?"

This way, you learn how to look after yourself. It's probably one of *the* most important principles of the teachings. The Buddha is here to give you guidance on how you can be reliable in looking after yourself. You can take charge of yourself; you can be responsible. You don't have to go around depending on other people all the time. But it does require that you learn how to admit your mistakes to yourself; otherwise, you never learn. It also requires that you learn how to notice when you did something well and not be embarrassed to think about it.

The principle of causality may be complex, but there's enough regularity to it that you can learn from it. This is why we're here practicing: developing mindfulness and alertness so that we can watch ourselves and evaluate our actions, learning how to step back a bit and ask how things might have been done better.

This is particularly useful when we get into issues around the four noble truths. The Buddha wants you to step back from your craving. He wants you to step back from your clinging to the aggregates so that you can see, “What is this all about?” The world teaches us to go with our craving. “Obey your thirst,” they tell you. Then, of course, they try to take advantage of your thirsts in that way. But the Buddha’s saying, “Step back. This person you think you are, that you’ve identified with: Do you have to continue making that identification?” He says you don’t. The things you’ve done and the habits you’ve developed over time: You can change them if you see that they’re unskillful. You’ve got that potential for freedom.

And here’s how you take advantage of it. Get more mindful; get more alert so that you can learn from your mistakes. In that way, you can make fewer mistakes.

So when you see your mind stumbling down a road to depression or whatever, you can pull yourself back and say, “No, I don’t have to go there anymore. I’ve been there. I know what it’s like.” When you go into a tailspin, you can get yourself out. Develop this ability to step back, step out, watch things, evaluate them, and say, “Well, that’s where the mistake was. I’m not going to do that again. And here’s an alternative, a better alternative. Let’s try this.” This is what every teacher in the tradition wants to see in his students: their ability to observe themselves, step back a bit, and change course when necessary.

After I’d been Ajaan Fuang’s attendant for about three or four years, I made a habit every day, when I would go to his hut to clean it up, to prepare questions for him if there was something that had come up in the course of the day that I didn’t understand or anything that might seem relevant to the practice. I’d learned early on that you didn’t just come blurting out with your questions. You had to frame them properly. But there came a point where I just didn’t have any more questions. A question would come into my mind, and I’d immediately know how he would answer it. I mentioned that to him one day, and he said, “Good. It’s a sign that we know each other now.” The purpose of really knowing your teacher this way is that you’ve internalized the Dhamma, and that becomes your refuge.

This ability to step back and evaluate is not just a factor of concentration; it’s *trained* in concentration. It gets more and more refined as we work on evaluating our thoughts so that we bring them to stillness. That’s a very special skill. But in the course of that, you’ve got to learn a lot about your thinking: what gets it stirred up; when it’s going in a skillful or unskillful direction; what you can do to calm it down when it’s unskillful; and what you can do to encourage it when it’s skillful.

These are all important lessons that apply not only to concentration but also to your whole life, seeing the way you interact with people: How is it skillful and how is it not? When it's going well, how can you keep it going well and not get complacent? When it's going poorly, how can you watch it with enough patience and equanimity until you understand it without getting depressed?

When you can do that, then the teacher's heart can be at rest. And *your* heart can gain confidence. You really can learn how to look after yourself with ease. We wish that for all beings every day, and this is how you make that wish a reality in your own life.