The Shape of a Circle

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Recently I came across an interesting passage in a talk by Ajahn Chah where he reports one of the teachings he learned from Ajahn Mun. It was that we should make the shape of our practice the shape of a circle. A circle doesn’t end. You follow the circle around and around and around. You never come to its end. In other words, the practice is something you should do continually. Stick at it day in, day out, no weekends off, no holidays. It’s something you stick at continually. Because that’s the way it develops momentum. Now, as you look at your practice, you’re going to find it does have its ups and downs. So maybe a better shape would be an ellipse. The word for circle in Thai also covers ellipses. Sometimes it’s closer to the center, sometimes it’s farther away, but it still stays in that same basic shape. It doesn’t end. In other words, some days you have more energy to put into the practice, more time to put into the practice, and other days you have less. But you put into the practice what you’ve got. Here it’s useful to think about a lesson I saw in that book I was reading. It was a lesson on learning how to swim. When you practice swimming, some days you have more energy to put into it, some days you have less. Some days you have more time, some days you have less. But you’re always careful to make sure that you maintain proper form. In other words, when you’re doing your formal meditation, try to give it all your attention. Five minutes out of the day, make sure you give it full attention for five minutes. As you’re going through the day, try to keep in touch with your breath as much as you can. In other words, try to nurse that intention that wants to stick with the practice. Don’t push it aside. All too often, all your other intentions get in and they crowd it out. They make sneering remarks about it, or else they make other nicer remarks, but basically they crowd it out. That poor intention just gets shut off to the side and gets used to being pushed around. But if you always have in the back of your mind that this is the intention you really want to stick with, this is the intention you want to have, the intention you want to be someplace in your awareness. That provides a different perspective on everything else that happens. In other words, it helps keep you from getting totally immersed in whatever mood or whatever thought world comes coming along. There should always be at least a little bit of your mind that stands outside and reminds you, “This is impermanent, this is stressful, this is not self, you can’t really find any true happiness here.” Just keep that note in mind. Sometimes that note is enough to keep you from getting totally swallowed up in the thought. In other words, proper form here doesn’t necessarily mean that you have to be sitting in formal meditation, but you have that thought in the back of your mind. Whatever comes up, part of you stands outside. Try to keep that continuous. There’s another passage in Ajahn Chah where he says, “Just that thought, reminding yourself about these three perceptions, these three contemplations about inconstancy, stress, and not-self, is enough to pull down. Any unskillful desire, any unskillful craving.” The contemplation itself comes out of a kind of desire. You have to want discernment in order to gain it. You have to want the goal at the end of the path in order to reach it. So you are dealing with a kind of desire here. So you could say that the contemplation flows out of the desire. Or in Ajahn Chah’s image, that’s like a branch that comes out of desire. But it’s a big branch, and it just stays there. It doesn’t have to do anything, but it weighs the tree down in that direction and finally pulls it over. If you can keep that thought in mind, whatever it is that arises in the mind, remind yourself that it is going to pass away and you can’t let yourself get totally sucked into it. Just keep that thought in mind, in the back of your mind. That helps keep you from becoming totally wound up in your thought words and totally forgetting the practice. So as long as you have that much of an intention, that much of a mental note kept in mind—and this is what mindfulness means, you keep something in mind, so keep this in mind, that part of you can always stand outside of your thought world. Whatever the situation you find yourself in, whether it’s a thought world or this sensory world around us, your relationship with other people, part of you always stands outside. That’s how you keep your practice circular. Keep it in that ellipse that doesn’t end. As with all ellipses, like the ellipse of the moon around the earth or the earth around the sun, it’s not the case that the moon will always be there or the earth will always be there. Mathematicians have found that if the moon ever hits a particular spot, it’ll be totally out of that orbit for good. The same with the earth. Any place where you have more than three bodies interacting, the forces get so complex that at some point everybody leaves the system, or one of the members can leave the system. It’s the same way with this ellipse, this circle. There will come a point where you finally get it just right and you can leave the system entirely—this system of suffering, this system of things that are in constant stress, not self-conditioned, unreliable. You don’t have to go anywhere else. Just stay in this circle. Stay in the ellipse. And someday you’ll be totally free, even of the ellipse. Keep this thought in mind, that you want to maintain proper form throughout the day, i.e., proper form is that part of the mind that can stand outside your thought worlds and knows them for what they are, that can stand outside the sensory world and knows it for what it is. Just that much of a perspective can free you.

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