The Need for Evaluation

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When you focus on the breath, when you try to bring the mind to a state of concentration, you’re trying to do two things at once. One is to give the mind a place where it can rest, gather its strength, heal its wounds. And, in general, develop a sense of ease and well-being. The second purpose is that we want to be able to watch the mind, to see what’s going on in the body, to see what’s going on in the mind, so we can understand how we’re giving rise to suffering and how we can put an end to it. So we’re here both for well-being and for knowledge. It’s good to keep this double purpose in mind, because sometimes we come to meditation and all we want to do is rest. We don’t realize we’re also here to do some work, as Ajahn Lee calls it. There’s concentration work, directed thought and evaluation. These are the factors in the first jhana, and they’re a necessary part of the meditation, both for the sake of well-being and for the sake of knowledge. We can’t ignore them. We can’t try to slough over them and skip over them, because this is where a lot of our insight into the mind and into the body comes from. Sometimes you hear of directed thought and evaluation simply as being kind of the wobbling of the mind as it’s trying to steady itself, an unfortunate weakness in the mind that you want to overcome. But that’s missing the whole point. They’re a necessary part of the meditation. As Ajahn Lee points out, what we’re doing here is learning to focus on the breath and getting to know the breath, evaluating the breath so we can give rise to a sense of pleasure, and then taking that sense of pleasure and seeing how we can spread it throughout the body. It’s obvious that this is going to help with that sense of well-being we’re trying to develop in the concentration, but it’s also very important in getting to know what’s going on in the concentration. It involves a certain amount of work. When you look at the analogies for the different levels of jhana, the analogy for the first jhana, the bathman mixing water in with the powder, it’s the only analogy where you’ve got a conscious person doing a conscious effort. The other analogies are the water filling the lake or the lotuses being saturated with water or a person just sitting there covered with cloth. There’s no conscious effort involved. There’s no evaluation involved. But here, in order to get the pleasure to go through the body, you’ve got to evaluate exactly what’s blocking the pleasure from going through the rest of the body and what exactly constitutes pleasure. You’ve got to learn how to evaluate the breath. You take that judging faculty of the mind. You learn how to use it skillfully. You learn how to test your ideas. You think, “Well, maybe long breathing would be good tonight or maybe short breathing would be good tonight.” Well, test them. See what results you get. Learn how to evaluate your results. It’s only through trial and error like this, over time, that you begin to gain a sense of when you can try to trust your powers of perception, when you can test your various ideas about what’s going on in the body. Can you push the pleasure through the body? Try it. See what happens. How about going through the body and finding where there’s tension and relaxing that? See what happens then. How about using different perceptions about the breath, how it comes in, how it goes out? Noticing where some perceptions create unnecessary tension and others can dissolve that tension immediately. In other words, you’re using the active faculty of the mind and learning how to develop skill with it. And you’re getting a sense of how the physical elements in the body work together. What exactly is the breath in the body? What’s the fire element? What’s the earth element? What’s the water element? How can you manipulate them in ways that pleasure can flow through the body? You also learn to read your experience in terms of the five aggregates. The different elements here are four. And you’ve got that feeling of pleasure. Are they the same thing or are they something separate? Then there’s the perception, the different labels you apply to the breath, to your sense of the body, your mental image of the body. Learn how to use these things deliberately. Then there’s the fabrication. Here’s the direct thought and evaluation. It’s a very necessary part of the fabrication going on in the body. And then there’s the consciousness. To get that pleasure to develop through the breathing and then to be able to spread it through the body, you’ve got to see these things. You’ve got to see the body and your mind as aggregates. Get a sense of where the perception is, the label that’s running things here. How do you fabricate ideas? How do you test them to see what works and what doesn’t work? Which ideas are useful and which ones are not? In this way, you get to develop insight as you’re getting the mind to settle down. You’re familiarizing yourself with how the mind creates this inner world here. It is a form of becoming. You’ve got the desire to give rise to concentration, and you’ve got the aggregates, which are your field. The desire is the water, and your consciousness is the seed. It’s all right here. In the process of evaluating how you’re getting the mind to settle down, how you can maximize the pleasure, you’re getting to know the field, you’re getting to know the moisture, you’re getting to know the seed. All the elements that go into creating this inner world are the same elements that will create your sense of the world around you and the sense of the next world that you go to after you pass away. It’s all right here. In the process of evaluation, you’re getting to know them. So don’t try to skip over this step of evaluating, saying, “I’ll just stay with one spot and hope it’s going to turn into something stronger and better.” You’re missing an important step in the concentration practice, the part that combines insight with the concentration, and the part that can maximize the pleasure. Again, this is a way of serving both purposes of the concentration, creating a larger sense of well-being throughout the body so that pleasure saturates the body. The sense of fullness, refreshment, lightness, these can saturate the body as well. When the body is saturated like that, it’s a lot easier to stay here. At the same time, in learning how to work with this feeling, work with these perceptions, you’re getting a hands-on sense of what the Buddha is talking about when he talks about aggregates. You need to get more skillful in consciously directing your perceptions than when the Buddha tells you to apply the perception, say, of impermanence or inconstancy, stress, not self. You can apply them with more precision. You understand what they’re for. They’re for the purpose of lessening the burdens of the mind. They’re for the purpose of getting you to pull back and watch what you’re doing more carefully. See where it’s causing unnecessary suffering. So you’re developing a lot of the skills and knowledge that you need to go beyond the concentration and go to actual release. So don’t try to skip over this step as a nuisance. It’s absolutely essential to what we’re doing here. You need to evaluate. Without that process of evaluation, no discernment is going to arise.

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