Evaluation

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There are many ways that concentration can give rise to insight. And one of the most important is in that factor of evaluation, one of the factors of the first jhana. Some scholars simply translate it as “sustained thought.” Once you focus on a meditation topic, then you stay with it. But the word vijjana in Pali has a lot more active meanings than that. You really look into something and decide, “Is it good? Is it bad? What can be made to make it better?” That’s vijjana, evaluation. And as you learn to apply that to your breath, you’re sharpening your powers of discernment, increasing your sensitivity, and making your attention all around. For instance, you work with the breath. See what ways of breathing feel best in the body. Realize that the breath doesn’t appear at only one spot in the body. For example, the passage of air over the nose. The air wouldn’t pass in and out if the lungs weren’t expanding and contracting. The lungs wouldn’t expand and contract if the muscles in the ribcage, the muscles in your back, the muscles in your shoulder, your diaphragm, your abdomen, weren’t expanding and contracting at the same time. And as they expand and contract, that affects the balance of the body as a whole, which means that ultimately the whole body is involved in the breathing process. In fact, the healthiest breathing is just that, when every part of the body is involved. No part is shut off, no part is excluded. So when you’re trying to figure out what rhythm of breathing feels best, ultimately you have to take the whole body into consideration. There’s no one to stand behind you to say, “Okay, now breathe this way, now breathe that way.” You have to look at your breath yourself and decide what’s really good for right now, because you want to create a space in the body, your inner sense of the body, that’s good to settle down with. If it doesn’t feel good to settle down with, you’re not going to settle down. The mind’s going to be ready to jump away at any point. So you’ve got to watch, you’ve got to decide what feels good right now and what feels good over time. There are some ways of breathing that feel good in the immediate present, but if you stick with them too long, they start having bad effects on the body. This is something you’ve got to learn. Watch for yourself. Then you look for the effects all around. This is an important quality to develop. John Mahābhūla once noted that he would latch on to a particular teaching from Ajahn Mahan and look at it from only one side, get a very narrow, unbalanced view of the teaching. And as he applied it, he would see it. Well, he wouldn’t see it, but he’d create. He’d create unskillful results in another area of his life. This is what he admired about Ajahn Mahan, his ability to look at everything from all sides. That’s real discernment. That’s real wisdom. So as a meditator, you’ve got to learn to look at things from all sides as well. What feels good now? What feels good over time? What feels good in one part of the body? What feels good in the rest of the body? How are these things? How are these things connected? That’s where real insight comes. If you focus on things too narrowly, you miss a lot of what’s going on. So you’ve got to look at things all around. This is a quality we try to develop here in the monastery. As Ajahn Lee once said, you want your eyes to be as large as the whole monastery. In other words, each of us has a particular duty that we take on. But we should also look around us to see what other duties are not getting done. We don’t have organized work meetings. Nobody is assigning us jobs. It’s all voluntary. And in a system like this, if you can call it a system, there are things that tend to fall through the cracks. So it’s good to keep your eyes open to what’s falling through the cracks. Take that as your opportunity to make a little extra merit on the side. There are times when emergencies come up, things that require that we work longer, work harder than we normally might. It’s good to keep your eyes open to that as well. In other words, your gaze gets all around. When you develop that all-around gaze in your daily life, then it’s a lot easier to apply it to your meditation. Because a lot of the defilements in the mind tend to get started in our blind spots. If there are blind spots in your concentration, you’re not going to see the defilements that will come over and just take it over. They sneak up behind you like a person with a big burlap sack. You’re not looking, but the burlap sack goes over your head and you find yourself carried around and then dumped off someplace else. And if you’re sitting here with a breath, with a breath, with a breath, all of a sudden, whoop, you’re off someplace else. And it’s not that there weren’t any warnings. It’s just that you weren’t looking at them. Your gaze wasn’t all around enough to see. This is an important element in meditation, is having this all-around gaze so you can see what’s going on and develop your powers of balance as well. Sometimes you focus too strongly on one part in the body or one point in the body, and it’s going to have a bad effect on other points. The elements in the body, the four properties, get out of balance. Things get too heavy or too light-headed. That’s because your balance is too one-sided. Ultimately, we want to be able to get everything into balance—not too cold, not too hot, not too heavy, not too light, like Goldilocks and the porridge. You want your feeling of balance in the body to be just right. It’s only then that you can look more directly at the mind, otherwise the body keeps interfering. At the same time, if you haven’t developed the powers of discernment and sensitivity, then it can allow you to stay focused simply on awareness in and of itself. So this process of working through the breath, working the breath through the body, working the breath through the mind, getting an all-around sense of the energy level of the body, and having an idea of what’s just right and how you maintain your balance. It’s an important element in developing discernment, developing the sensitivity you need in order to see into the mind. Because everything we need to know is right here. It’s simply that we’re not sensitive enough to what’s going on. Huge areas of our awareness are in the shadow. We’re not thinking about the yungi yin shan. It’s just simply the fact that your awareness isn’t focused there. Other things tend to get blocked out. So try to develop this property of evaluation. It’s one of the main factors that allows concentration to become a good foundation for insight, the balance for insight, and provides a certain steadiness to the body. It quiets things down so that events in the mind begin to stand out more prominently. So even though your powers of concentration may have gotten beyond the first jhana to higher states, it’s good to keep going back to what needs to be done. You look at Ajaan Lee’s writings, especially in the years when he was working on exploring breath meditation, and you find many different ways of explaining how the breath energy works in the body. There’s the breath, he says, that comes up the spine. That’s a good breath to rely on when your back is feeling weak. Just think of energy flowing up from the base of the spine up through the neck at the top of the head. There’s energy that comes up the front of the body from the navel. That can be useful at times as well. There’s a still breath energy. There’s the breath energy in the blood vessels, the breath energy in the nerves. In Ajaan Fuang, we talk about the breath energy in the bones. There’s breath energy that spins around in place. There’s breath energy that moves from one side of the body to the other. There’s an upflowing breath that comes from the soles of your feet up to the toes. There’s a downflowing breath that starts at the top of the head and goes down to the soles of the feet and out. There are lots of different ways of conceiving the breath energy, the purpose being, one, to create a sense of balance. If things seem out of balance, if parts of the body seem starved of breath energy, how can you picture the process of breathing in your mind? So as to include those starved parts, you might want to relax around them. When you breathe in, think of the breath going into that part. When you breathe out, you don’t have to push the breath out of that part because the part needs a lot more breath energy. So keep thinking of coming in, coming in, coming in. As for the out-breath, it’ll take care of itself. There are lots of different ways of conceiving how the breath energy can bring things into balance. You have to use your ingenuity, use your sensitivity, all of which are elements in insight, discernment. So you can use some of Ajahn Lee’s ideas, Ajahn Fueng’s ideas, or you can explore the breath energy in different ways on your own. The important principle is that you learn how to develop your own powers of evaluation. When things come up in the meditation, you can’t always go running to somebody else and say, “What is this? Is this good? Is this bad?” You’ve got to learn how to look at it. You’ve got to learn how to decide on your own. So we start with the breath. And from the breath we work into more subtle, refined questions in both the body and the mind. There’s even the question of when to put the evaluation aside and just be still in the present moment. That, too, has to be evaluated. You experiment. Putting aside for a while, just stay still with the breath, stay still with your sense of awareness, and see how long it lasts, how stable it feels. If it can stay stable and focused, fine. If not, that’s a sign you need to do more evaluation. This is one of the ways in which concentration can lead to insight, and it’s a very personal kind of insight. It comes from exploring on your own. That’s the best kind of insight—the insights that come from outside, that we hear from other people and try to apply. If you simply try to convince yourself that what they say is true, that’s not really insight. That’s just a perception, a concept you’ve imposed on things. But if you can use their insights to spark insights of your own, that’s when genuine insight can arise, the kind that surprises you, either because it’s so unfamiliar or it’s so familiar that you’re just overlooking it. So keep looking and evaluating. That’s how things progress in the present moment. practice.

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