

Doing Nothing

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Ajaan Suwat once told a story of the first time he went to stay and practice with Ajaan Mun. One day, Ajaan Mun asked him how his practice was going, and Ajaan Suwat had to admit that his mind was all over the place. He felt very embarrassed, but Ajaan Mun said, “Well, at least you know your mind is all over the place. You know it’s wandering around. That much is a step in training mindfulness: knowing the distracted mind as a distracted mind.”

What I liked about the story was Ajaan Suwat’s comment that he realized Ajaan Mun wasn’t praising him, or saying that he should stay at that level of practice. He was just trying to comfort him and give him encouragement. So he didn’t let it go to his head. He realized that his mind was distracted but it wasn’t what he wanted.

That’s a sign of a good meditator, someone who can take praise and yet not get carried away by it, someone who can take encouraging remark and not interpret it as a sign he’s done something special. After all, when you’re practicing mindfulness, knowing that your mind is distracted is a step better than not even realizing it at all, but it’s just a step. It’s still not where you want to be. When the Buddha taught mindfulness, he wasn’t advocating simply noticing whatever’s arising. He taught a whole cluster of qualities to develop:

mindfulness, which is keeping something in mind;

alertness, which is watching what you’re doing and what the results of what you’re doing; and

ardency, the persistence of right effort. Right effort means distinguishing what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in the mind, and learning how to block or end any unskillful states in the mind and how to give rise to skillful states and then how to develop them further. That’s ardency in the practice.

The effort here is not just a blind effort. It has to involve a certain amount of insight. The Buddha talked about how working on the establishing of mindfulness leads directly into factors for awakening. This is how you do it. You start out with mindfulness, and then there’s a quality called analysis of dhammas, analysis of present qualities of mind, and that’s this ability to know what’s skillful and what’s unskillful, to see which states of mind drain your energy, which states of mind make it difficult to stay concentrated. Then you try to figure out ways to get around them.

In the beginning, you simply watch them coming and going, but you don't just stay there. The next step is to figure out *why* they come, figure out *why* they go, so that you can use that knowledge to prevent them from arising again.

As for skillful states, again you want to see why they come, why they go, so that you can use that knowledge to maintain them and develop them. And what are the qualities you want to develop? Again, mindfulness and alertness, allowing them to develop into concentration.

Those factors of the mindfulness practice—mindfulness, alertness, and ardency: Ajaan Lee talks about how they blend into the factors for jhana. Mindfulness turns into directed thought, alertness turns into evaluation, and ardency becomes singleness of preoccupation. You really stick with your object and you learn how to stick with it skillfully so that it gives rise to a sense of rapture. This is where you get energy in your practice. That sense of rapture is your food. Ajaan Fuang compared it to the lubricant for an engine that keeps things from drying out, that keeps the engine from seizing up.

For instance, analysis of qualities enables you to figure out exactly how much pressure to put on the breath, how to breathe in a way feels just right for all the different parts of the body. You don't breathe in a way that satisfies one part by making another part uncomfortable. You try to figure out how to make the whole body feel nourished by the breath. This means giving equality to each part of the body. Let them all breathe in a way that feels good. After a while, they start getting coordinated.

When you have that sense of fullness, the remaining factors for awakening come easily. Calm—*passaddhi*—concentration, and equanimity build on that sense of fullness. The mind settles down to more and more refined levels until it's really solid. Everything in the body is still. The mind is still. The breath seems still. It's still because you're so full of breath energy that the oxygen coming in and out of the pores is enough to keep you going. Your main consumer of oxygen in the body is the brain, and when the brain isn't moving around much, you need less and less and less oxygen. That allows the breath to get more and more subtle, more and more refined, until ultimately it can stop—not because you're holding it, but simply because you don't need to breathe.

So when you're doing mindfulness practice, this is how you do it properly. It's not just noting or just accepting whatever comes up. You have to use mindfulness in such a way that you develop other skillful qualities as well, leading to right concentration. There's no place where the Buddha says one quality or one technique will take you all the way to awakening. There are steps, there are clusters of mental qualities you have to develop, and they require that you be observant to

see what's lacking, what's going overboard. When there's too much energy, when the mind is all over the place, how can you calm it down? That's something you've got to look into. When there's too little energy, what do you do to stir up the mind to give it more energy?

The Buddha said basically it's this ability to analyze what's skillful and unskillful, to keep developing what's skillful until you get a sense of rapture. The rapture is the food you need to keep the meditation energized.

But when there's too much energy, you've got to figure out how to calm it down. Give the mind one thing to think about and just stay with that one spot. Or you can move around the body, trying to calm the breath energy in the different parts of the body, relax the breath energy in the different parts of the body. Let the excess energy flow naturally out the palms of your hands and the soles of your feet. The mind that seems to be jumping around will have less and less reason to jump around. It's like a mustard seed in the hot pan. If you turn off the heat, the mustard doesn't have to jump. You can settle down.

So this quality of *dhamma-vicaya*, or analysis of qualities, is one of the most important ones in the factors of awakening. It helps you see what's needed. As the Buddha said, mindfulness is needed all the time, but the other ones are needed at different times in the meditation. And one of the things you have to do as a meditator is to train your ability to recognize what's needed at any one particular time. The Buddha sets out the basic outline in the various sets of dhammas. At different times in your meditation, you'll find that different sets of dhammas speak precisely to what's going on in your mind. But it's important to keep in mind that there's no single quality that will take you all the way.

Analysis of qualities—this ability to see cause and effect in your mind, what gives good results, what doesn't give good results: That's the basis for insight. So you can't just note, note, note, note, or accept, accept, accept what's going on. You also have to know the connections between cause and effect, and figure out what's giving good results and what's not, and then adjust your meditation accordingly. You have to be observant. Because it's only when you're observant that you can bring things to a proper balance.

Awakening comes when the mind is in balance. Sometimes our idea of awakening comes from the picture of the Zen meditator pushing, pushing, pushing through the dark night of the soul until there's a sudden breaking point. But that's not the image the Buddha gives. His image is of finally bringing the mind to a sense of balance to the point where nothing has to be done. And when nothing has to be done, that's when you're *able* to do nothing. You can parse that

sentence in two ways, and both of them are helpful to think about: You're finally able to do nothing, and there's nothing you *can* do at that point.

That's when things open up. But to get there requires a lot of precision in figuring out when to push, when not to push, when strong effort is helpful, and when simply watching is helpful. You've got to use your full powers of observation to get things into the right balance.