

A Game of Chess

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One of the problems in the practice comes from the fact that we can read about the entire practice all the way from the very beginning steps up to the highest. And whether it's because we live in a culture that tries to boil everything down to the simplest steps, or just basic human nature—impatience—we want to go straight to the top.

We get impatient with the beginning steps, especially when we see our minds muddling around with concentration and mindfulness is hard. Actually, the simple act of mindfulness isn't that hard, but sticking with it is. Maintaining mindfulness, maintaining alertness, all these other qualities: The maintaining is hard to do. So we hope for the quick insight or the quick tactic that can take us straight to the top so that we can get this meditation business behind us and get on with our lives.

But it doesn't work that way.

You can't just let go totally in one moment and have the whole job done. It's like playing a game of chess. You can't have your queen leap across the board and put the king on the other side into checkmate. It takes many stages, many steps. Some of your chess pieces you have to do your best to protect; others you have to be willing to sacrifice. And only as you maintain and develop your strategy do you finally get to the point where you win: Checkmate! Then you lose interest in the pieces; the game is done. That's when you let go of everything. But in the meantime, there are lots of things you've got to hold on to.

A very simple principle Ajaan Lee mentions is that, first, you learn how to let go of whatever's obviously bad, obviously unskillful, and hold on tight to what's skillful. When your skillful qualities have done their work, then you can turn around and look at them. See how those are fabricated as well. Then you let them go.

It all sounds nice and linear. But as you know if you've been practicing any length of time, there are ups and downs, ins and outs. You make progress, then you backtrack and try another tack. Yet it's important that you don't see the backtracking as a total waste. It's simply a matter of lessons you have to learn more carefully, to figure out new ways of approaching them. In the course of doing so, you develop your discernment—so in that sense, the back and forth is necessary.

Discernment isn't just a matter of cloning what you read in the books. It's more tactical. For example, with the khandhas—the five clinging-aggregates: We

read in the Buddha's second sermon, on the not-self characteristic, that as you contemplate these, you let them go. We tend to forget, though, that this was delivered to people who'd already become stream-enterers, who already had a good foundation in the practice. That's when they let go of everything. But in the meantime, you've got to take those khandhas and convert them into the path.

You look at the different factors in the path. Take right concentration, for example. There's directed thought and evaluation. That's fabrication. There are feelings of pleasure. That's feeling. There's the perception of whatever object you're focused on. As the Buddha said, all concentration states, up through the dimension of nothingness, are all perception-attainments. They're based on a perception that you keep in mind—as when you focus on just “breath, breath, breath.” Then there's the form of the body, and the awareness of all this. You've got the five aggregates right there.

You look at the other factors of the path and you find that the aggregates are all involved there as well. So it's a matter of taking the aggregates you've been carrying around, you stop carrying them on your back, and you place them down. Suppose they were a load of bricks on your back: You take the bricks and turn them into pavement on a path. You walk on them, and that gets you where you want to go.

One of the Buddha's insights into our experience of the aggregates is that each of them has an intentional element. There's the raw material for the experience of form, feeling, perception, etc., and then you have an intention that turns the potential into the actual experience of form, feeling, etc.—which means that if you change your intentions, then you change the way these things function. This is how you use them as the path.

For instance, form: Even our experience of the body is not totally given. There's an element of past karma there, but there's also our present karma. The breath is the factor that fabricates your experience of your body. There's an intentional element in how you breathe, so learn how to take advantage of that. Breathe in a way that's comfortable; breathe in a way that you can stay focused on. And that simple act, if you use it for the purpose of training the mind, turns the form of your body, your sensation of the body, into an element of the path.

So try to take advantage of that fact.

The way you feel, the way you perceive things has an intentional element, too. Learn how to manipulate these things in a way that helps develop the qualities you want—mindfulness, alertness, concentration, discernment—so that you can use them as the various pieces in your chess game. There may come a point in the game where you have to let go of something in order to advance. But before you

have to let go of it, make sure you use it for what you can. You may have to lose your bishop at some point in the game, but you use the bishop in the meantime to protect the knights, pawns, and all the other pieces that need protecting as you advance.

As Ajaan Lee used to say, you don't just throw everything away. You learn how to take good care of these things because they're your tools. Otherwise, how would you get to awakening, to nibbana? Nibbana, after all, is unconditioned. It's not something that can be manipulated. You can't *use* it as the path; you can't use nibbana as the path to get to nibbana. You have to use conditioned things. So you've got the breath here. Now, sometimes the breath can be a problem, but you learn how to focus on it, stay mindful, stay alert, and that will take you to deeper and deeper states of concentration. Be alert to when the breath is long, when it's short, see how these types of breathing feel. When it's deep, when it's shallow: How does that feel? You can experiment.

Again, there's an intentional element in this, so take advantage of that fact to try things in different ways. See what works; see what doesn't work. Ultimately, you get to the point where the in-and-out breath stops. It's not that there's no breath energy in the body. The body is actually *filled* with breath energy, but it's a very still kind of energy. It's as if each little cell in the body is just humming with breath, so you don't have to pull the breath in; you don't have to push it out.

That's when you start acquainting yourself with the other elements in the body as well. The fire element, which is the sense of warmth in the body: Where is that most prominent? What happens when you focus on that? Again, you bring an intentional element in to see if you can activate it. Where is the warmth strongest in the body? Focus there first, and then think of spreading the warmth throughout the rest of the body. It's like turning up the thermostat or experimenting with a new stereo system. You've got to see how loud it can get. Of course, if you turn it all the way up, it's way too loud. It's uncomfortable, so you turn it down again. Then you find what's just right.

It's the same with the elements. They're paired. Fire is paired with water; earth is paired with breath. Earth is the sense of solidity, heaviness. Breath is the sense of lightness and energy, movement. As soon as you've learned how to tune things back and forth this way, you find what feels just right—like the porridge in the story of Goldilocks: not too hot, not too cold.

This has several advantages. One is that you can learn, when there are certain imbalances in the body, how to correct the imbalance. If you're feeling dizzy and lightheaded, think about earth. You're feeling sluggish and depressed? Think about breath.

Even more importantly, when you get everything really balanced, then it's a lot easier to move from a sense of the shape of the body into space. This is where you've let go of the breath, and you let go of form. You move into the area of the mental aggregates: feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness. You start out with space. Just think of the space that permeates the body, going between all the atoms and the parts of the atoms throughout the body. It spreads out beyond the body, too. It's unlimited because this kind of space goes through all atoms everywhere. Then learn how to maintain that perception.

When the perception is solid enough, you can ask: What is it that's aware of the space? That leaves just a perception of, "knowing, knowing, knowing." Maintain that perception. Get good at that, and then, when it's solid, see if you can let go of the oneness of that knowing. That moves you into the dimension of nothingness. Take this as far as you can go.

The basic principle is that you solidify the state of concentration you're in and then you notice: Where's the stress that's still in that state of concentration? It's like stepping back. When you're totally *in* that state of concentration, everything is really, really still. You can't think about anything. But then you can step back a bit and see: Okay, what's actually happening here? Notice: Where is the stress? Where are the activities and intentions that lead to that stress? Then you drop those intentions. This will either move you to a deeper state of concentration, or take you beyond concentration entirely.

You're using the concentration to the point where you can let it go, where you can sacrifice it for something better—for checkmate. But you can't start out saying, "Well, I'll just go straight to the top. I don't want to get attached to concentration, so I just won't do it." That leaves you at your baseline. Your chess pieces haven't moved at all, and yet you want to imagine checkmate.

To really win, you have to move your pawn here, move your pawn there, and get your pieces out on the board. You feel your way into the practice. A lot of this comes from feeling your way. You can read the books and have everything planned out beforehand, but then you'll discover that your practice doesn't quite go that way, just as each game of chess is a little bit different. But you take the basic principles, apply them, and you develop patience as best you can.

Then you let go in stages. Ajaan Fuang's analogy was of a rocket going to the moon. The main rocket provides the needed boost, and then it drops away. Then the next rocket takes over, until it, too, drops away. This is what sends the capsule all the way to the moon. Each part does its work and then you let it go, to move further on, further on.

If it seems long and tedious, remember that samsara is even longer and more tedious. With the path, at least you've got a sense of direction. Most people don't have any direction at all. They just fly around like bugs: up, down, in and out, not knowing where they're going, bumping into things or falling into flames. But at least you're on a path, and it goes someplace. Although there may be suffering involved in the path, there may be stress, still, it's a lot easier than not being on this path. And the various skills you develop, the tools you sharpen, you can use to fend off whatever suffering you encounter.

So again, it's like playing chess. It's not that all the pleasure comes in winning at the end. There's the pleasure that comes in learning to be a strategist, learning to figure out your next move. So learn to enjoy the game. Even if you don't get checkmate today, there's always tomorrow—and see that as an opportunity rather than a burden.