

## *The Sport of Wise People*

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Ajaan Fuang once called concentration practice ‘the sport of wise people.’ Like any sport, it’s something you want to do well but you also want to *enjoy* yourself while you’re doing it. So you’ve got to find that right balance between sticking with it, mastering the technique, and having some fun in the process. Otherwise it gets grim and serious. Of course our purpose *is* serious, the practice is serious – we’re dealing with a big problem, we’re dealing with the problem of suffering – but if you’re *grim* about the path that grimness begins to grind you down. So you have to learn how to develop a light attitude around what you’re doing.

One of the skills of meditation is learning how to gladden the mind as you’re practicing. So, what would gladden your mind right now? Maybe some thoughts of goodwill. Try to think of someone you’ve never extended goodwill to before and spread goodwill to that person. You might want to choose someone a little bit challenging, and take it as you’d take a challenge in any sport: Here’s a problem, here’s a difficulty, but there must be a way around it, and you’re going to find it. This is one of the hallmarks of people who are not just good at a particular sport but *really* good. Once they’ve mastered one problem, they figure out where the next problem is, and the next, and they take joy in posing questions and learning how to answer them.

Once you’ve spread thoughts of goodwill, the next question is, how are you going to stay with the breath? Where would be a fun place to focus on the breath right now? Some place you haven’t thought of before, something new, something different. Ajaan Fuang would sometimes talk about thinking of a pole of light inside the body, extending down from the middle of the head, down through the spine. As you breathe in, think of the breath coming in from all directions into that pole of light, and as you breathe out think of it going out in all directions from that pole of light. This way, you’re not staying with just one spot. You’ve got a line in the body that’s your focal point.

Another time I heard him talking about breathing into your bones – think of all the bones in the body and the breath energy going into the marrow.

What this means is that you’ve got to ventilate the mind a little bit. Otherwise, it gets stagnant like the huts here when they’re closed

during the heat of the day. I've been going into the empty huts and opening them up in the evening and they're really stuffy because there's no circulation at all – sometimes the temperature inside is actually cooler than the temperature outside, but the fact that nothing is moving, there's no ventilation – it feels hotter. And the mind can be that way, too. If you've got a particular idea about the meditation in mind and you just hold, hold, hold to it and don't have any opportunities for changing things a little bit, it gets stuffy. So think of things that will gladden the mind, things that will bring some novelty your meditation, and that way you give yourself some staying-power.

Also, think about things you're carrying in from the day or carrying in from other aspects of your life. Can you let go of them? A lot of things we hold onto as being really important in life: We define ourselves around them, but if we can't let them go *at all*, it's like having a muscle that's tensed up all the time. So think of something you tell yourself would be impossible to let go of and then see if can you put it down for right now. Think the opposite thought.

Like that character in 'Through the Looking Glass' who said he'd like to think about of three or four impossible things every morning before breakfast: Think of something that would be ordinarily impossible for you to let go of, something you would define yourself around, and see if you can *un-*define yourself, at least for the time being. After all, everything you're holding in mind right now, you'll have to let go of at some point – all of your perceptions, all of your ideas. When the time comes to leave the body, you're going to have to leave a lot of those behind as well – and it's good to get practice because the path is something that requires staying power, and the trick to staying power lies in letting go of things that are really unnecessary.

It's like going camping. If you want to hike for a long time, you take a light burden: the lighter the burden, the longer you can hike. But for most of us, we have too many things in our knapsack – we're afraid we're going to miss this, we're afraid we're going to miss that, we've got to hold onto this, hold onto that, and as a result we hardly get away from the trailhead at all.

So anything that comes up in the meditation, just say, "Let go, let go, let go." You hold onto the breath, or whatever you've taken as your object, and just say to yourself, "That's it, that's all I'm going to hold onto." And have a light attitude toward it. As Ajaan Fuang would say, you *play* with the meditation. But you don't play in a

desultory or scatterbrained way. You play in the same way that a professional sportsperson would play at a sport – you keep at it, keep at it, keep at it, but find ways of making it interesting, find ways of making it challenging, and learn how to encourage yourself to be up for the challenge, to enjoy the challenges. This is what gives you staying power.

I've been working on a project having to do with humor in the Pali Canon. There are two basic ways it's used. One is to let go of the values of the world, to encourage you to not to be impressed by things that people in the world are generally impressed by, such as the fact that there are devas out there. There are some people who think, "Wow, if I get to talk to a deva I must be really special. The deva might give me important information." Well, the Buddha has you question that, by pointing out in a humorous way that they are a lot of devas who don't really know very much.

Or you might think that people who are rich and wealthy and powerful have something that'd be worth aspiring to – well, you look at the lives of the kings in the time of the Buddha. They had a lot of the problems that everybody else has: nothing special there. In fact, they have a lot of problems that ordinary people *don't* have. People who want a share of their power will feel no compunction about lying to them.

So you use the discernment of humor to give yourself a sense of distance from the values of the world. You can step back and realise, "I'm not enmeshed in those things; I don't have to be enmeshed in those things; those are things that I don't have to believe in or be impressed by"—and there's a lightness that comes from that.

The other use of humour is to look at the practice as something enjoyable. There's a really nice image of a bull elephant who's tired of being in a herd of elephants: When he goes down to bathe, all the other elephants push up against him. He tries to drink clear water, but all the elephants have muddied the water. So he goes off alone and bathes without anybody bumping into him. When he drinks water, it's clear. Whenever he itches anywhere, he takes a branch off a tree and scratches himself with it. And the Buddha interprets this image as being like a person who's going off to meditate: You use your concentration to scratch wherever you feel an itch.

So, where does your mind itch right now? Where does your body itch right now? Can you use the breath to scratch it? Can you use whatever your concentration topic is to scratch it? The image is nice and light-hearted, and so even though we're serious about the

practice – and, as I say, we’re dealing with a serious problem, the suffering in the mind – we want to have a light touch. Otherwise things get bogged down.

I think I’ve told you about the Englishman who walked across the Northwest Territories way back in the 1820s – the first recorded instance of an English person entrusting his life to a band of Dene. As they were going across the territory, of course, they were hunting, and on some days they’d catch some game and on other days they wouldn’t. On the days when they couldn’t catch game, he said, they tightened up their belts and spent their time joking with one another as they walked along, to keep up their spirits. Otherwise you start focusing on how hungry you are and you get more and more miserable and the trail seems more and more impossible. But if you can keep a light spirit about things, a long trail becomes shorter, and a heavy load becomes light.

So do what you can to keep your spirits up and to enjoy the meditation as a game.