

Right Exertion at Play

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It's a common custom in Thailand for people to invite monks to their homes for a meal and to have them chant first as a way of blessing the house. Ajaan Fuang, after many years of following this custom, got to a point toward the end of his life where he refused to chant. He said he'd be happy to come and discuss the Dhamma but he didn't want to chant.

I happened to go with him once to one of those invitations. We had our meal and then, after the meal, the sister of the woman who was the host for the day came to talk about her meditation. She'd been taught that you should empty the mind and not think about anything: Just let go, let go of whatever came up. Ajaan Fuang said no, that if you empty your mind, it's like opening the door to your house. Anything can come in. You've got to give it something good to work with.

This is in line with a comment he made to me one time, that you hear people saying that the practice is all about letting go, letting go, but it's not. It's also about developing. That was one of the few times he talked about controversies in the Dhamma, and it's directly related to one of the sets of dhammas included in the *Wings to Awakening*: the four right exertions.

These are the same as the four right efforts, and the important thing to notice is that there are four things to do. We don't just let go. If something unskillful hasn't yet arisen, you do your best to prevent it. If it has arisen, that's when you let it go. But you don't stop there. You also have to develop skillful qualities. If they aren't there, you give rise to them. Once they're there, you develop them even further to their culmination. Only then is your practice complete.

The nothing-but-letting-go model is based on the idea that your mind is basically pure. If anything comes up to disturb it, all you have to do is let it go, and then the natural purity of the mind will appear. But the Buddha never taught like that. As he said, the mind is capable of anything. It's capable of good things; it's capable of bad things. And it's not the case that the good things are part of its innate nature and the bad things are only added from outside. The Buddha never talks about innate nature in terms of the mind at all, aside from the fact that it knows, it's aware.

But as Ajaan Lee said, it's aware of good, aware of evil, but it itself is neither good nor evil. It has lots of potentials. So if you simply let go, let go, there's nothing. No natural goodness is

going to come rushing in to take the place of the things you let go. You've got to develop good things in their place. Otherwise, you're in the position that Ajaan Lee calls letting go like a pauper. *Anatha* is the Thai term, which literally means someone without a protector. You don't have wealth to protect you, you don't have anything or anybody to protect you. You're exposed to whatever can come.

I've seen this in cases where people are told, "Don't do anything in the meditation. Just note what arises and let it go." Then when some really bad things arise, they're defenseless. So you do need defenses. You need protection. And you can protect yourself by developing good qualities inside.

This is one of the reasons why we work with the meditation, to give the mind something to do, to protect it from that old phrase, "The devil makes work for idle hands." If your mind is full of idle hands, who knows what those hands are going to create? Who knows what they'll latch on to? So give them work to do.

It's like a child you keep at home. If you just say, "Go into your room and let go," the child is going to start climbing the walls, finding some way to get out. You've got to give the child something to play with.

This element of play is an important part of right exertion. It's not all sweating effort. It's not all drudgery. We're working on concentration, and concentration includes rapture and pleasure. You get to think about things in the body and mind, to figure them out. In other words, you keep the mind occupied with something that can be entertaining and educational at the same time. It's like giving a child a toy car to play with. The child can play with the car, using its imagination, but you can also encourage the child to take the car apart, to see how it runs, and then put it back together again.

In the same way, when you play with the breath, it's not just playing. As you play around, you learn about bodily fabrication, the intentional element in the breath. You learn about verbal fabrication, the mind talking to itself about the breath. You begin to see basic patterns. You direct your thoughts to a particular topic and then you make comments on it, you question it. You develop your understanding around it. You also get more sensitive to mental fabrications—the feelings that arise with the breath—and what you can do with them. You realize that feelings are fabrications. You're not just stuck with a pleasant feeling or an unpleasant feeling, willy-nilly.

You can play a role in shaping the feelings that dominate your awareness in the present

moment by the way you breathe. You can also do it with the other type of mental fabrication: perceptions, the images and words by which you identify things. You can cultivate feelings by the way you perceive the breath—with the images you have in mind of the breath, your conceptions of what's going on as you meditate. This way, you learn about the mind; you learn about the body's relationship to the mind.

All of which is really useful knowledge for the sake of putting an end to suffering, because these processes of fabrication, if you do them with ignorance, will cause suffering. That's the very first link in dependent co-arising. If you do them with knowledge, though, they become part of the path. So, as you occupy the mind with developing good qualities, you're not just giving it busy work. You're allowing it to be entertained and at the same time educated about what's going on in the mind: how things are put together, how things can be taken apart, and how you can then put them back together again in a better way. Finally, you can take things apart in a way where you know entirely what's going on, so that you can find something that's not put together, not fabricated at all.

You don't really understand the unfabricated until you learn how to fabricate really well. And you fabricate really well when you enjoy it. This is why the Buddha encourages you not simply to let go and be equanimous. You work on developing good qualities in the mind. And in doing that, the mind isn't empty-handed and it's not going to start thinking up some really nifty things to distract itself in the wrong way. In other words, it's not going to be developing a lot of unskillful qualities, because as you develop the good qualities, you don't give it unskillful qualities a chance to come up. That's how we let go of what's unskillful: by occupying the mind with working with what's skillful.

So remember that right exertion has these four aspects, and the complete training requires that you get good at all four. You know when to let go, you know when to prevent things from happening, you know when to give rise to things, you know when to develop the good things you've got.

That way, the mind is fully occupied in something really enjoyable and educational: the best sort of education, the education that can put an end to suffering. So make sure your efforts and your exertions are complete, so that you can develop a more complete understanding of the mind and a more complete freedom that comes from that understanding.

