

## *A Good-natured Attitude*

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Ajaan Suwat would often start his meditation instructions by saying, “Put yourself in a good mood.” Think of anything related to the Dhamma that puts you in a good mood. You have to approach the meditation with a good-natured attitude because it’s going to involve work and require persistence. You could look at it as a long chore, but it’s wiser to find some way to make it enjoyable, so that it’s not a matter of struggling, struggling, struggling – all in hopes that something really good is going to turn out at the end. There is a struggle, there is effort, sometimes extreme effort, but if you do it with a good-natured attitude all along the way, it makes it a lot easier to do the effort. You’re not wasting your energy putting unnecessary stress, unnecessary strain on yourself, and you’re also in a good position to gain insight.

Insight comes from the ability to step back a little bit. The image in the Canon is of a person sitting who’s watching someone lying down, or someone who’s standing watching somebody who’s sitting. You have to pull back a little bit to watch things. And a lot of that ability to pull back involves seeing your own foolishness as you get totally wound up in a particular pursuit, a particular idea, “This has got to be this way, this has got to work,” and yet it doesn’t work and it doesn’t work and it doesn’t work, and you’re banging your head against the wall. Part of you has to step back and laugh in a very good-natured way at yourself and say, “Look at what you’re doing. Listen to yourself. Watch yourself.” And that’s what can save you.

So try to approach the practice in a good-natured way, with this ability to step back. The ancient Greeks used to say, “It’s the gods who laugh.” Human beings struggle and suffer on Earth, but the gods are sitting up on Mount Olympus. Because they’re a little bit disengaged, they can look down and see what’s happening and have a sense of humor about the whole thing. It may sound cruel when one person is laughing at somebody else that way, but when you’re able to laugh at yourself, that’s the beginning of wisdom, the beginning of discernment.

So what we’re trying to do here is to get our path of practice on the right path. Some people have problems with the idea of a right path versus a wrong path. But, as the Buddha said, if you’re trying to make sesame oil you don’t crush gravel, you crush sesame seeds. There’s a right way to do it and a wrong way to do it. And it’s the same with the path to the end of suffering. The wrong path doesn’t work. The right path does.

Ajaan Fuang liked to point out two implications of the word *samma* in the factors of the right path. The standard translation is “right,” but one of the implications Ajaan Fuang saw in the word is “consistent.” you stick with it over time. And the other is that it’s just right—not only right but “just right.” Your concentration is just right, the amount of effort you put into it is just right. And how are you going to know what’s just right? You have to experiment. And

you have to learn how to listen both to your body and to your mind, to see what the warning signals are for when you've gone too far off to the left, too far off to the right. And again, that requires a good-natured attitude that can step back a bit and just listen, come to a conclusion, test the conclusion, and if it wasn't right, well, listen some more, experiment some more.

Ajaan Lee talks about the factor of alertness in the practice, comparing it to a rope over a pulley: sometimes you pull it one direction, sometimes you pull it the other direction. His meaning is that sometimes you focus most of your attention on the breath and sometimes you focus more of your attention on the mind. For example, when you're working with the breath, if you find the breath intriguing, if you find it interesting and it's enjoyable to work with the breath, go ahead and do it. But sometimes you find that it starts getting frustrating. You want to make it better and better and better, and it doesn't seem to be getting better at all. Sometimes it gets worse.

That's a sign that you've got to turn around and look at the mind. Why is the mind so upset about this? After all, it's just breath. And any old breath is going to keep you alive. Learn to be satisfied with what you've got. If the breath seems to be as good as it can go right now, okay, be willing to settle down here. You're not the princess with the pea under twenty mattresses. You're just here to get involved in the present moment in a way that's pleasurable, because the fact of pleasure is what allows the mind to stay concentrated, to stay happy here in the present moment. If the breath doesn't make you happy, talk to yourself in a way that makes you happy. And if your efforts to adjust things to make them just right, to make them just perfect, goes out of bounds, well, you've missed the purpose of the whole exercise. So you back up a bit. Just stay with the breath for a while.

And then sometimes, as you just stay with the breath, you begin to sense things you didn't sense before and you can make a little more adjustment again. It's entirely up to you. You're not doing this to please anyone else or to measure up to somebody else's standard. You're here to make the breath pleasing to yourself, or at least as comfortable a place as you can manage right now so that it's good enough to settle down. And it's up to you to decide what's "good enough" for settling down.

The important thing, once you've settled down, is that you stay there for a while. Try to let your awareness spread. Even if you can't spread the comfort of the breath, let your awareness spread around the body so that you have a sense of the whole body as you breathe in, the whole body as you breathe out. That's what's important. Because sometimes the best way to make the breath more comfortable is simply to watch it continually and with as broad a perspective as possible.

It's like the quality control people in a factory. The cloth that they're supposed to watch is running past, and if they move their eyes away from it, even for a second, they can very easily miss some problems in the cloth. So they have to keep a steady gaze on the cloth. And that way they're able to check whatever's wrong, simply by the steadiness of their gaze.

So sometimes making the breath more comfortable is simply a function of how steadily you watch the breath. Without your having to think about making it longer, making it shorter – simply being steady with it – it becomes almost automatic: The breath begins to adjust.

And that way, you move to the next stage, where you don't have to think about evaluating the breath or bringing your mind to the breath, because it's right there, and you're there with it. And the quality of your focus gets more continuous. Before it was like music, in which you'd have a phrase that would then stop and then another phrase that would then stop. In other words, you would be with the breath for a while and then sort of blur your awareness a bit and then come back and be more clearly with the breath, then your awareness would blur out a bit, as if your attention came in phrases. Now, thought, the phrases turn into one continuous long ride down the breath through time. This is where the mind becomes really one. And you didn't have to think about when you were going to stop evaluating the breath, it just seemed like the right thing to do. This comes from learning to listen both to the body and to the mind.

That pulley that Ajaan Lee talks about as checking the mind, checking the body, now doesn't have to move back and forth because body and mind are right here together. The breath is right here, the mind is right here. Try to have the sense that your observer can watch both of these things at once.

And do what you can to keep that observer in a good mood. Sometimes when it starts getting dry, the Buddha says to drop the topic of your meditation and start thinking about something that inspires you. It might be the Buddha, it might be the Dhamma, the Sangha, the good that you've done either in terms of your generosity, in terms of your virtue. Then when the dryness goes away or the antsiness in the mind goes away, you can bring it back to the breath. Remember that you've got to have a number of tools at hand.

It's like dealing with a child. You read about people who try to develop scientific ways of raising their children and the children come out all screwed up. But if you raise the child with lots of different methods, it will come out well balanced. It's simply a matter, as Ajaan Lee says, of getting a sense of what the child needs at any particular time. Sometimes when the child cries the best thing to do is to pick it up and pat it on the back. Sometimes you've got to check it out and make sure it's not sick. Sometimes you give it something to eat. Or just take it outside, take it for a walk. And over time, if you listen to your child, you get a sense, when it's crying, of exactly what needs to be done. There are times you have to be strict with it. And times you have to be gentle.

The mind is like a child. It's not going to respond just to one technique over and over and over again. It requires you to check things, experiment, find out precisely what's needed right now and provide it—and continue to do it in a good-natured way.

That's one of the skills that we seem to lack most here in the West: continuity. We have all sorts of conveniences so that things get done fast, fast, fast. And we've never learned how to commit ourselves to something that's going to take a long time and may not be easy, that

requires a lot of work. We have to learn how to talk ourselves into sticking with it with a sense of pleasure, with a sense of good humor.

Ajaan Lee says that working with the breath is like walking on a long journey. You have somebody to talk to all along the way. In other words, you work with the breath here, you work with the breath there. And as long as you do it in a friendly way, it's enjoyable. You can stick with it. In this way, as he says, long journeys seem shorter. But if you're constantly fighting along during the journey, then it becomes the other way around: a short journey seems long. Or if you're insisting that your travel companions be perfect, you're going to have trouble finding travel companions and you yourself are going to get miserable. So if the breath is good enough, okay: Good enough will get you there.

This is all a factor of discernment, keeping the path on a "just right" mode, so that your concentration is just right, your mindfulness is just right, feels good, feels okay. And of course it's going to slip off to the left and slip off to the right. But if you maintain your good humor, you can catch it—because you're willing to listen and watch, to learn from your mistakes.

So try to develop this factor of alertness and make it as continuous as possible. Because as Ajaan Lee says, alertness, when it gets strong, is what turns into the vision of knowledge and vision that releases the mind. That knowledge and vision doesn't magically drop out of the sky, it's simply this factor of alertness developed, sharpened, to a heightened degree. You can develop it because you stick with it, and you stick with it because you're able to do it in a good-natured way.