

The Shape of a Circle

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Recently I came across an interesting passage in a talk by Ajaan Chah where he reports one of the teachings he learned from Ajaan Mun: that we should make the shape of our practice the shape of a circle. A circle doesn't end. You follow the circle around and around and around, and you never come to its end. In other words, the practice is something you should do continually. Stick at it, day in, day out, no weekends off, no holidays. You stick at continually because that's how it develops momentum.

Now, as you look at your practice, you're going to find that it does have its ups and downs. So maybe a better shape would be an ellipse—the word for circle in Thai also covers ellipses—sometimes it's closer to the center, sometimes it's farther away, but it still stays in that same basic shape. It doesn't end. In other words, some days you have more energy to put into the practice, more time to put into the practice, and other days you have less. But you put into the practice what you've got.

Here it's useful to think about a lesson I saw in a book on learning how to swim. When you practice swimming, some days you have more energy to put into it, some days you have less, some days you have more time, some days you have less, but you're always careful to maintain proper form in any event. In other words, when you're doing your formal meditation, try to give it all your attention. Even if you can only manage five minutes out of the day, make sure you give it full attention for the full five minutes. And as you're going through the day, try to keep in touch with the breath as much as you can. Try to nurse the intention that wants to stick with the practice and don't push it aside. All too often, you allow your other intentions to get in, and they crowd out your original intention. They make sneering remarks about it or else insincere nice remarks, but basically they crowd it out, and that poor intention just gets shunted aside. It gets used to being pushed around.

But if you always have it at the back of your mind that this is the intention you really want to stick with, this is the intention you want to maintain at least someplace in your awareness, that provides a different perspective on everything else that happens. It helps keep you from getting totally immersed in whatever mood or thought world that comes along. There should always be some part of your mind that stands outside to remind you: "This is inconstant, this is stressful,

this is not self. You can't really find any true happiness here." Keep that thought in mind. Sometimes that much is enough to keep you from getting totally swallowed up in the thought world.

In other words, proper form here doesn't necessarily mean you have to sit in formal meditation, but you do have that thought in the back of your mind, that whatever comes up, part of you stands outside. And try to keep that outside awareness continuous.

There's another passage in Ajaan Chah where he says that just the thought reminding yourself about these three perceptions—these three contemplations, about inconstancy, stress, not self—is enough to pull down any unskillful desire, any unskillful craving. The contemplation itself comes out of a kind of desire. You have to *want* discernment in order to gain it. You have to want to go all the way to the end of the path in order to reach it. You are dealing with a kind of desire here, so you could say that the contemplation flows out of the desire. Or in Ajaan Chah's image, it's like a branch that comes out of the tree of desire. It's a big branch and it just stays there, it doesn't have to do anything, but it weighs the tree down in that direction and finally pulls it over.

If you can keep that thought in mind—that whatever arises in the mind, it's going to pass away, and you can't let yourself get totally sucked into it, just keep that thought in the back of your mind: That helps keep you from becoming totally wound up in your thought worlds and totally forgetting the practice. As long as you have that much of an intention, that much of a mental note, kept in mind, this is what mindfulness means: You keep something in mind. So keep this in mind, the part of you that can always stand outside of your thought worlds, the part of you that can always stand outside whatever the situation you find yourself in, whether it's a thought world or this sensory world around us, your relationship with other people. Part of you always stands outside.

That's how you keep your practice circular, in an ellipse that doesn't end until you hit the right spot, like the ellipse of the Moon around the Earth, or the Earth around the Sun. It's not the case that the Moon or the Earth will always be there. Mathematicians have found that if the Moon ever hits a particular spot in its orbit, it'll be totally out of that orbit for good. The same with the Earth: Any place where you have three or more bodies interacting, the forces get so complex that at some point one of the members leaves the system. And it's the same way with this ellipse, this circle. There will come a point where you finally get it just right and you can leave the system entirely—this system of suffering, this system of things that are inconstant, stressful, not-self, conditioned, unreliable. You don't have to

go anywhere else, just stay in the circle, stay in the ellipse, and someday you'll be totally free, even of the ellipse.

So keep this thought in mind, that you want to maintain a proper form throughout the day, maintaining that part of the mind that can stand outside your thought worlds and knows them for what they are. It can stay outside the sensory world and know it for what it is. Just that much of a perspective can free you.