

In Search of What is Skillful

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When you go into a forest, there are three kinds of things in the forest: There are the things that are obviously there, things that are obviously not there, and then there are things that are there, but are not so obvious.

With the things obviously there, no matter what you're looking for, no matter how you're looking, you're going to see them. Like the trees: The trees are everywhere. With things that are not there, like say, a black hole: No matter what you're looking for, no matter how you're looking, you're not going to find it. But it's different with the things that aren't so obvious. There are certain kinds of mushrooms that you're going to find only if you look in the right way—or your chances for finding them are much improved if you're looking in the right way, and if you know what you're looking for.

This is a good image to keep in mind, because what we're looking for in terms of getting the mind to settle down in concentration and taking that concentration even further belongs to that third category. So if we're not finding concentration, we should ask ourselves: "What am I looking for, and how am I looking?"

Think of the Buddha on his path, looking for awakening: As he said, he was seeking the sublime state of unexcelled peace. That's what he was looking for, and the way he looked for it, he said, was to look for what is skillful. In other words, he was assuming the principle of cause and effect, and that the important causes were in his mind—coming from inside. His own actions: Those were the things that would be skillful or not. So whenever he found himself at a dead end, he would stop and ask, "What am I doing, and how could I do it differently?" He was obviously not getting the peace he was looking for, so he turned around and looked at his actions, reflected on what he was doing, and tried to find something better: a new way of acting.

So when your meditation is not going well, it doesn't help much to blame things outside. There *are* some circumstances that make it difficult, but sometimes we can get obsessed: Things are good enough, and yet they're not good enough for us. We can get obsessed about what someone else is doing, noises, this that or the other thing—outside.

But that's really beside the point: You have to keep looking back inside, inside. And remember the Buddha's instructions: How do you get the mind into concentration? You do it by practicing right mindfulness—*establishing* mindfulness.

There's a passage where the Buddha pretty much equates his description of establishing mindfulness with the first jhana. He describes the basic formula for right mindfulness, and then once the mind is settled in, he says to stay focused on, say, the body in and of itself, but

don't think any thoughts related to the body. In other words, you drop directed thought and evaluation, and that's how you get in the second jhana.

Which implies that in the establishing of mindfulness, there will be directed thought and evaluation as factors of the first jhana. Now, that's not described in the formula, but Ajaan Lee was reflective enough to see the connection. This shows that he was going about things in the right way: doing the concentration and reflecting on it, reflecting on his own actions.

He saw that those pieces of the formula—keeping the mind focused on something in and of itself, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, being ardent, alert, and mindful: Those three qualities were equivalent to the different factors of the first jhana.

Of those three qualities, the wisdom quality is ardency. Mindfulness is defined simply as being able to remember things done and said a long time ago—which could be perfectly neutral: You can remember skillful things, you can remember unskillful things, and at that point, simply being mindful on its own doesn't make the distinction. The same with ardency: Ardency is being aware of what you're doing while you're doing it and the results of what you're doing. And again, you can be perfectly alert doing some very unskillful things, but it still counts as alertness according to the definition.

It's in the definition of ardency where the distinction between skillful and unskillful becomes important: You're ardent to abandon what is unskillful, you're ardent to develop what is skillful. That fits in with the Buddha's way of looking for the unexcelled state of peace: the search for what is skillful. At the same time, the evaluation factor in the first jhāna is the factor that's very much concerned with what's skillful and what's not. It's the wisdom factor in the concentration.

It's the process of trying to get the mind to be snugly with the object. If things are not going well, you look at what you're doing. You look at the mind states that you're bringing to the practice. As the ajaans would often say, "Make a survey of your mind as you're sitting down to meditate. Is it leaning forward, is it leaning back? Is it leaning to the left, to the right?" "Forward," of course, is when your thoughts are headed to the future. "Back," you're headed to the past. "Left" and "right," you're leaning to things that you're pleased or displeased with. If you see that the mind is leaning in any of those directions, you try to straighten it out.

There's an implication here in Thai you may not get in English, which is the word *leaning* in Thai is related to the word for bias or prejudice: *agati*. Your mind is headed in the wrong direction: biased toward what it likes, biased against what it doesn't like, biased because of fear, biased because of delusion. You're leaning over, and you're likely to fall.

Try to set these things upright. *Think* in ways that set them upright. This is all part of evaluation. Then you look at the breath: This is where Ajaan Lee gives lots of recommendations for evaluating the length of the breath, the quality of the breath. You're evaluating—once you get a sense of pleasure out of the breath—how you can make the most of it: spreading it through the body. You also evaluate how you can maintain that full body

awareness. This is in line with the passage in the Canon where you're spreading feelings of rapture and pleasure throughout the body. And of course you're directing your thoughts to the breath, to the state of the mind, as you evaluate them.

So this engages ardency, alertness, mindfulness, all together. And as long as you have to think about the breath so that you're not thinking about anything else, you *maintain* these factors. Because you know that if you're not thinking about the breath, you'll start thinking about something else. If you're not evaluating the breath, you'll be evaluating something else—outside of the meditation—and you will have lost your focus.

So evaluation is part of the wall that protects your concentration, protects the singleness of your focus, part of keeping the breath in mind, keeping focused on the breath in and of itself. And right there, you've got all the causal factors of the first jhana. You begin to notice: Yes, there is a sense of fullness and refreshment, there is a sense of ease and pleasure. What notices? Alertness and evaluation. The alertness is there *in* the evaluation, just as the ardency is in the evaluation, and the ardency is in the directed thought.

As you keep observing what's going on, you begin to notice that you don't have to think so much about the breath, you don't have to evaluate it so much—everything is going well inside, you've got everything saturated with a sense of well-being. There may be little pains here and there, but the predominant sensation throughout the body is one of ease, fullness, refreshment.

Then as your last act of evaluation before you leave the first jhana, you realize you don't have to keep on evaluating, you don't have to keep on directing your thoughts. You can drop that. You're just *there*—one with the breath, one with the whole body, awareness filling the body, breath filling the body—and you're mindful to maintain that.

Now, this doesn't mean that alertness and ardency go away, they just change their roles. In the first jhāna, they were part of the evaluation. Now that you've dropped the evaluation, the ardency is aimed at staying fully focused, maintaining that centered but broad awareness, without gap. The alertness keeps watch. There's still a thought in mind, but at this point it's a perception: just "breath, breath, breath..." You're not thinking in full sentences anymore. But those three qualities of mindfulness are still there—ardency, alertness, mindfulness—simply that they've changed their role, because, as you've evaluated, the old role is no longer necessary.

Now, if you find yourself slipping out of that focus, you may have to go back to evaluate the breath again. But these three factors that are mentioned in the formula for right mindfulness carry all the way through the various states of concentration. It's simply that they change their roles as you go from one to the next.

So when we're being mindful, it's not simply a matter of being aware of whatever is happening—we're *directing* things: toward an unexcelled state of peace. Even though concentration itself is not that state of peace, it's the path there. It's leading in the right direction.

And you're doing it all along by looking for what's skillful. If things are not going well, you turn around and look at what you're doing. When they *are* going well, you maintain them, keep watch over what you're doing, to see how it might be made even more skillful. When you take responsibility for your practice like this, that's when you're going to get to see things that are not so obvious.

So right mindfulness does have its agendas. The way the Buddha defines it is specifically mindfulness for the sake of concentration. Concentration is for the sake of discernment. Discernment is for the sake of release.

But none of these things are obvious, which is why you have to be very careful about what you're looking for, and how you're looking. If you follow the Buddha's example, you're headed in the right direction.