

## *How Completion is Found*

*July 24, 2006*

This is a practice with a goal.

It's important to state that because so often you hear that there is no goal or that the path is the goal. But there is a goal. After all, the Buddha said that this practice is a path. The whole notion of a path is that you're going someplace. There's a development and it reaches a point of completion.

One of the descriptions of the arahant is someone who has done the task, completed the holy life. So completion is an important. It's the whole point of the practice.

The Buddha's very last word was to achieve completion, *sampadetha*. You do that through heedfulness. But heedfulness means that you realize that you don't know how much time you have.

There's a famous sutta where the Buddha tells the monks to be heedful. And then the monks report on how heedful they are. Some say, "Every day, I remind myself of the fact of death. I tell myself, 'I hope I can live for the rest of this day in order to achieve something with the practice.'"

And from there it works down to monks who report that they do it twice a day, and finally gets down to one monk who says, "Every time I breathe in and every time I breathe out I say 'I hope I live for another in- and-out breath so that I can accomplish something in the practice.'"

And the Buddha said that the last monk was the one who's heedful. All the rest, he said, were heedless.

What heedfulness means is that you have to focus your attention on what you're doing right now and try to do it well. That's where and that's how the goal is going to be attained.

Now, you have no idea how long it's going to take, whether you're going to make it in this lifetime or some later lifetime. But every step that you take in the right direction is an important step. So you focus on the step.

You don't focus on how much time you're got left, whether it's going to be one more day here at the monastery or five months at the monastery or however long. Try to put that thought out of your mind.

Just say, "I've got this moment." And what do you do with this moment? You do the most skillful thing.

The Buddha's path is a path of actions: physical actions, verbal actions, mental actions.

Like right now while we're meditating: Meditation is a mental action, there's an intention involved. The intention is to get the mind to settle down. And in the course of working on that intention, you're going to gain

understanding of the mind as well.

If the mind wanders off, you have to understand how to bring it back—and how to bring it back in such a way that it likes to stay. That requires understanding. You can't just use brute force. Otherwise, the mind will rebel.

So you've got to develop a good comfortable spot, your spot inside the body someplace, where it feels comfortable to stay focused. And you learn how much pressure is too much pressure and how much is not enough: to get to the point of "just right."

All of this means trying to be skillful. And that means trying to learn from your actions. If you do something well, remember it. If you make a mistake, remember it. Learn from it and try to find another way of doing it. When you recognize that something's not working, learn to look at the situation and see what you're doing wrong.

In terms of the concentration practice, there are those seven steps in Ajaan Lee's "Method 2." And those are a very useful way of reviewing how things are going in the meditation. Ajaan Fuang once noted that when people came to him with problems in their meditation, he'd found the solution some place in those seven steps. One of those steps was missing in their practice.

So memorize the steps, keep them in mind. And then when things don't go well, measure your meditation against the seven steps and see what's lacking.

But you'll find that those seven steps are just the major framework. There are minor details in terms of your own proclivities that you can learn about only through trial and error. So you have to develop the right attitude towards trial-and-error.

When you make a mistake, don't drag yourself down, saying, "I'm a horrible person, can't do anything right." Just see, "Okay, here's one action that didn't go right, but you now have an opportunity to try it again. See if you can do it in a different way."

So get questions of who-you-are or how good you are or how bad you are out of mind and just look at the situation in terms of what's the best thing that needs to be done. What's lacking in this situation or what's excessive in this situation? Then try to provide the action that's appropriate for the situation.

That's what it means to be heedful. Because in the course of doing that, you're developing the most important aspect of the practice. Heedfulness means that you understand the principle of karma and that it really is important what you do. If our actions didn't matter, then there'd be no need to be heedful. There'd be nothing you could do. Your actions wouldn't make any difference, so it'd be pretty arbitrary, it wouldn't really matter what you did.

But here your actions *do* make a difference: the difference between pleasure and pain and lesser pleasures and greater pleasures, and then the ultimate

happiness. It all depends on what you do, which means you have to be very careful in what you do.

So get your 'self' out of the picture. This is the actual opposite of a narcissistic practice, trying to make yourself a wonderful person or whatever attitude you might have. Even when we're really negative on ourselves, that's an aspect of narcissism, too. When we're really taken up with what kind of person we want to be: That's narcissism again.

Get your idea of who-you-are out of the picture. Just say, "Just look at this action; look at this situation. Is this the action appropriate for the situation?" If it's not, find something else to do. Approach it in a different way.

Because what-you-are is not something that you are, it's an action. It's a strategy. And you want to be the sort of person who habitually tries to master the most skillful strategy in any given situation. So when you look back on the practice, if you need some encouragement when you start getting discouraged about how things are going, remind yourself, "Well, at least I have this good habit, which is trying to figure out the skillful thing to do given the situation." That's really the most that can be asked of any person.

You can't demand that you're going to reach stream-entry in the end of three months or six weeks or whatever. But you can demand, "At this moment I'm going to try to do the skillful thing." If you're fortunate enough, you then get another moment and you try it again. And if you're fortunate, you get another moment, and you try it again.

Over time, the skillfulness develops, your sensitivity develops. You're sensitive both to what you're doing as you meditate and sensitive to the results.

Getting the mind to settle down: This is the intentional part of the practice in working on the concentration. As for the insights, you can't intend that you're going to gain a particular insight on any particular day. But the insights do come: If you're observant while you're trying to get the mind to settle down, you can't help but see. Catch the mind in action. See how it does things, see how it hides things from itself, see how ignorance creates problems, and see how you can get around the ignorance by really watching and observing.

So this much you *can* demand from yourself: that if you've got this breath, try to stay with this breath as skillfully as you can. If the breath needs adjusting, work on that. If it doesn't need adjusting, just learn how to stay with it. As the breath starts growing more and more refined, stay with the sense of refinement.

At the same time, try it to spread the sense of ease that comes with that refined breath so that you don't slip off away from the body. Try to inhabit the whole body with a sense of well-being.

Think of the breath flowing whichever way feels best right now throughout the whole body. And be aware of the whole body, because that gives you a

foundation for the times when the breath gets so subtle that you can't even see the in-and-out movements of the breath.

And once you get to that spot, learn to maintain your balance there.

It's like walking on a tightrope. Of course you're going to fall off in the beginning because it takes a while to get your balance. But then after a while you begin to see how you can maintain your balance and you can stick with it for longer and longer periods of time.

So this is how completion is attained. It's by focusing on each moment, giving importance to each moment, realizing, "I now have this one in-and-out breath. I've got an opportunity to practice. Let's make the most of it."

Approach each moment as skillfully as you can. And as the moments pass and you're still alive, you've got the opportunity to get more and more skilled.

There will come a point where the skill does reach a point of completion. You can't map it out ahead of time that it's going to take  $x$  number of days, weeks, months, years, lifetimes. But you can be confident that this is where it's found, this is how it's done. It's right here.

The more importance you give to the present moment, the closer you get to the goal. That's why you have to avoid thinking of the goal as something down the line, in terms of stepping back from the present moment and looking out across the calendar. It's something to be found right here.

So look right here. If you give complete attention to the present moment, that's how completion is found.