

Evaluation

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One of the really distinctive features the Buddha's teachings is the extent to which he encourages you to use your own powers of evaluation. He doesn't tell you simply to believe him; he doesn't tell you to stop thinking or to stop questioning. He encourages you to question. He encourages you to think. But he also gives advice you on how to do it in a skillful way.

He starts out with things that are close to you, things that are part of your everyday life. He says to look at the way you're generous, look at the way you behave around other people, and see what happens as a result of your actions. Look at your intentions. Look at the results of your actions. That's what he told his son, Rahula, in his first Dhamma lesson that we have recorded of his lessons to his son. Look at your intentions. Look at your actions. And look at what happens as a result. Do your actions really lead to happiness or not? Learn to see these connections for yourself. Learn to evaluate them.

So it's ironic that, as Buddhism comes to the West, often it comes as a meditation technique that discourages people from thinking. Either you're told to get away from your conceptual mind or your logical mind, or you're told to be nonreactive, to just note without thinking about anything. But that doesn't do justice to how the Buddha taught meditation. Instead of tying your hands, he gives you lots of tools in meditation, lots of topics that you can meditate on for different ailments of the mind.

In his instructions on right concentration, he starts out with directed thought and evaluation. One of the factors of awakening is analysis of qualities, which is a skill of looking at events in the mind to see which ones are skillful and which ones are unskillful. Try to make yourself sensitive to the fact that whatever comes from your mind is going to have an effect. It's not just that things come and go, but that they also tend either to produce happiness or to produce pain. You want to observe that. That's the big issue. That's where he points your attention. He says to focus your powers of evaluation here, and then he has you apply that same principle to the practice of meditation.

You focus on the breath. Think about the breath and evaluate it. Is this a good comfortable breath to stay with? Does it feel good being with the breath? If it doesn't, you can change. No one is standing over you with a whip, telling you not to change, not to do anything, or to just accept whatever's there. After all, you've had a hand in creating whatever's there. If you want to disentangle yourself from

whatever suffering is involved in that, you first have to learn how to create skillful things, how to create pleasure in the present moment.

There are lots of ways you can do this. You can adjust the breath in terms of its length. You can make it deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. You can think of the breath as energy throughout the whole body flowing out to every pore, coming in and going out. You can focus anywhere in the body, and see how it works.

How else do you think discernment is going to rise? It's not a matter of putting your mind into a meat grinder. It's a matter of being very sensitive to what you're doing and learning how to evaluate the results, becoming more and more sensitive as you go along. That way, discernment comes not from following instructions, but from developing your own powers of sensitivity, catching yourself doing unskillful things that you didn't notice before, and realizing that you have a choice not to do them that way. The only way you're going to see this is to develop your powers of evaluation.

Those teachings on seeing for yourself: You've probably heard the discourse to the Kalamas, where the Buddha said don't go by what you've heard, don't go by what you've read, but also don't go by what you've reasoned out on your own. Look and see what actions gives which results that are skillful, which mental states lead to happiness, and which mental states lead to suffering. Take that as your standard.

That standard gets carried all the way through the practice. If the mind has trouble settling down, look to see what you're doing. Is it because you're trying to anticipate things too much? Or is it because you have memories of times in the past when it was good, today is not quite as good as it was in the past, and you're getting upset about that? If you see that happening, just let that particular thought go. You don't have to knit it into your meditation. Let it be loose strands, just floating away. As for anything else that comes up in the meditation that causes stress—the way you focus on pain, the way you deal with distracting thoughts: The Buddha gives you lots of ways of dealing with these things. It's up to you to discover which particular strategy, which particular technique, is going to work right now.

Sometimes when thoughts come up in the mind, he says you've got to work through them. In other words, you have to consciously figure out ways of sidestepping the thought, or banishing the thought, or ignoring the thought, replacing it with a better thought, relaxing around the formation of that thought. There are other times, he says, that you can simply watch. He doesn't give instructions as to which technique to use at which time. It's up to you to observe,

up to you to figure out. In the course of doing that, you develop your powers of evaluation.

So it's not that the Buddha would tie you down to one technique. He gives you many and he wants you to be good at all of them, so that you can develop your own powers of evaluation. What happens as a result is that you get more and more sensitive to what you're doing, and more sensitive to the results. You begin to act—in terms of your words, in terms of your physical actions, in terms your thoughts—with more and more finesse. You create less suffering for yourself, and your powers of sensitivity grow more and more refined. The actions you do in the present moment become more and more refined as well, until ultimately they reach a point where there's nothing to do. The mind reaches a point of equilibrium where you realize that if it did anything at all, it would be causing suffering one way or another. Even if it forbade itself to do anything, that would cause itself suffering, stress—a slight stress, but still there. That's when the mind reaches a point of what they call non-fashioning. That's what opens up to another dimension entirely. That's where you can stop knitting in your meditation.

You reach this point of cessation not by slamming on the brakes or by putting the mind in a box. You do it by learning how to be more and more sensitive in how you evaluate your actions and their results. You do this in two ways. One, focus on the Buddha's question: What are you doing that's causing suffering? What are you doing that's causing stress? And two, what techniques do you have for causing less stress? It's good to have a wide range of possibilities—or a wide-ranging sense of the possibilities that you have at hand—so that your awareness of the mind's movements—its actions and results of its actions—gets more and more all-around, so that nothing escapes your notice.

So remember, when the meditation begins to seem confining, that you've probably forgotten some of the techniques the Buddha offers. Try to remind yourself of the broad range. When it begins to get dry, you can think thoughts of goodwill, compassion, empathetic joy, or equanimity. When you get discouraged, you can think about members of the Sangha in the past who seemed to have reached a dead end in their meditation but then were able to break through. Reflect on the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha. Reflect on death when you're lazy. Contemplate the body when you're feeling lustful. The Buddha offers lots of techniques. And in every case, he wants you to use your powers of evaluation to see what works.

That way, insight is not the result of a mechanical process, sticking the mind on an assembly line and hoping that it comes out a little door marked "insight." Instead, it's more of an all-around process, where the Buddha gives you lots of

tools and encourages you to become skillful at figuring out this one issue: what you're doing that's causing stress and how you can stop doing that. Bring all of your powers of observation to this question, so that whatever physical pain or mental pain arises in the course of the meditation, you can keep remembering that you've got lots of tools at hand. In that way, you find that you can face any kind of suffering, any kind of pain at all with a sense of confidence—remembering that that kind of suffering is optional, the suffering that comes from your own ignorance, so that you don't have to keep on being a victim over and over again.