

Good & Bad Meditation

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Meditation is supposed to work. It's supposed to make a difference. That's why we do it. So why do we sometimes hear that there's no such thing as good or bad meditation? Part of the reason is that when you start out meditating you're not a good judge of what's good and what's bad. This is a problem with meditators everywhere. If you're not familiar with the territory of the mind, you can't tell a step forward from a step back. And if you're tied up in the problems of conceit, it makes things even more difficult. If what looks like a step forward is happening, you can get puffed up, proud, and complacent. If what looks like a step back happens, you get depressed. Either that or you go into denial.

Which is why, at the very beginning, you're told not to pass judgment on your meditation. Just do it. This is especially true when you go to a place where everybody who walks in the door is taught meditation right away. They can't assume that you have the maturity or the experience needed to judge your meditation. But ideally you should be developing the qualities as you meditate that will eventually put you in a position where you can pass judgment in a skillful way.

And it should be the purpose of the meditation teacher to put you in the position where you don't need a meditation teacher anymore. The other day, I was talking to a friend who made the comment that it takes people twenty, thirty years to be able to judge their own meditation. That struck me as scary, because if after twenty years you can't tell when you're making progress or not, there's got to be something wrong with the meditation. Meditation should develop the mental skills and qualities that make you a good judge of your progress.

In the beginning it's good as to sit with whatever comes up, because one of the attitudes and skills you need to be a meditator is patience. You're able to sit with whatever happens. Whether it looks good or looks bad, you can sit with it. You can watch it. The purpose is not that you're just going to sit there and say, "Well, this is as good as it's going to ever get, so I might as well accept it and be happy with this." That's a very defeatist attitude. The purpose of patience is so you can watch and learn. The more patient you are, the more things you'll be able to see, because you can sit with whatever comes up.

This is why the Buddha taught Rahula meditation on the elements: Make your mind like water; make your mind like wind; make it like fire; make it like earth. These things have no preferences. They are willing to wash away anything, good or bad; blow away anything, good or bad; burn anything or have anything thrown on them, good or bad, with no sense of revulsion or delight. They don't make choices as to what's nice and what's not. Now, the purpose of making your mind like this is not to make it a clod of dirt. It's to enable you to see what's going on—steadily, consistently, over a long period of time. This is because the insight we're after here is not simply that things are inconstant, but that there's a pattern to their inconstancy. You want to be able to see that pattern all the way from cause to effect and from effect back to cause. That requires that your gaze be steady and consistent.

It's like having measuring equipment in a scientific experiment. To begin with, you want the equipment to be set on a solid table set on a solid floor in a solid building on a solid piece of land. That way, if there's a little squiggle in the recording stylus, it actually has

something to do with the experiment. It is not a result of the table's wobbling or the building's wobbling or a tremor underground. In addition, you want the stylus to keep riding continually. You don't want there to be a gap, say, from 1 a.m. until 5 a.m. Your experiment is a long-term experiment, and you want it to be 24/7. That's the kind of solidity and consistency you want in your mind in order to be able to see what's going on—so that when things are good, bad, or indifferent, you can stay right here.

The other quality that makes you a good observer is honesty: Whatever comes up, you're going to admit that it's come up. You're not going to go into denial and you're not going to embellish it, make it more than what it really is.

This is the foundation for a really scientific attitude toward the meditation. Sometimes you hear of specific methods as being scientific, that they've worked everything out, all the steps, and all you have to do is follow the steps. They even have all the questions and answers on cards; they have standard meditation talks. Everybody gets put through the same process. That's scientific in the same way that an assembly line is scientific, but it doesn't mean that the workers on the assembly line are going to be scientific, or they understand anything of what's going on. The process is too mechanical. That's not the science that the Buddha was teaching. He was teaching how to experiment, how to take joy in finding things out—which means that sometimes you do what you're told in the meditation and sometimes you do what you're not told, so you can see what happens.

Once you've got those qualities of honesty and patience under your belt, you can start playing around. Kurt Vonnegut once made the observation that scientists are basically little kids, and little kids like to play. Scientists like to play. They get grants and fellowships so that they can play big time. And of course, we hope that their playing will have some pay-off. There are whole branches of science whose pragmatic pay-off is not immediately evident. But it's good to have people experimenting, trying to figure things out, because you never know when a chance discovery is going to be valuable.

And so it is with the meditation. When the Buddha taught, he taught techniques that open things up to questions. It wasn't that everything was all certain and mapped out and that all you have to do is follow the steps ABCD down the line. He would try to provoke questions in the mind: How do you breathe in a way that calms the effect of the breath on the body? Are you aware of the whole body when you breathe in and breathe out? After you've answered the Buddha's questions, you can start asking questions of your own. There's a pain in your legs: How do you breathe so as to minimize the pain, or to at least put you in a position where you're not feeling threatened by the pain? I've often found in my own practice that a particular blockage in the body suddenly makes the meditation really interesting. Once, in my first year, I had a problem with my foot. I spent hours breathing in different ways to see how it affected the pain in the foot, and I learned a lot more from that pain than I did from a pile of Dhamma books.

So this is the Buddha's approach to meditation. He would make sure you have the right personal qualities, that you could be trusted to conduct experiments and be more or less objective about the results, and then he would set you loose. Sometimes, as with many scientific experiments, you may follow a line of inquiry but it leads nowhere. Well, you've learned something. You've learned that that particular line of inquiry goes nowhere. Then you follow other lines of inquiry, and then others, until you find something that really does open things up in the mind.

So this is where having a sense of good and bad meditation finally does become useful. In one sense, every meditation is good if you've bring the right attitude to it, regarding it as an opportunity to learn. With that approach, bad is bad only in the sense that a particular line

of reasoning doesn't go where you want it, or a particular approach doesn't really give you any real knowledge. But when you start getting sloppy, when you start assuming things that you shouldn't assume, feeling certain about things that are still uncertain—in other words, making the same kind of mistakes that a bad scientist might make: That's meditation that's really bad.

Sometimes you can see it. Sometimes there are cases where, fairly well into the meditation, you still need to talk things over with a teacher. But you want to get so that you can pass judgment on things in a judicious way—i.e., you're no longer judgmental, but you use your powers of judgment wisely, precisely, accurately, with real wisdom. You're responsible for your meditation. And once you accept that attitude of responsibility, you become a lot more careful, a lot more mature. You don't blindly hope that the method on its own is going to carry you through. Your method will carry you through if you're alert and watchful and judicious in the ways you apply the method. That's when the meditation gets good.