

Evaluating Your Practice

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When you try to bring the mind into concentration, there are two mental faculties that do most of the work. One is directed thought, and the other is evaluation. You bring your mind to the object, or as they say in Thai, you lift the mind to the object, you lift the object to the mind. This means that you make them both prominent, that you're right here in the present moment, you're going to stay with the breath in the present moment, and you want to emphasize the awareness and the breath. You try to keep them in line with one another. That's directed thought.

As for evaluation, you look at how things are going. How is the breath going? How is the mind going? Are they staying together? Or are they moving apart? If they're moving apart, what can you do to bring them back together, and allow them to stay together with a sense of ease and well-being? Because that's the direction where we're going: ease and well-being.

Now, to do this, both the evaluation and the directed thought have to use a few other mental qualities as well, such as mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. Mindfulness means keeping things in mind, remembering what you should keep in mind and what things you put aside for the time being. You have a couple of frames of reference you want to keep in mind. To begin with, you're focusing on the breath in and of itself. At the same time, you're also keeping track of the mind, to make sure it stays with the breath. If the mind slips off, you want to be able to remember, "What have I been able to do in the past that keeps the mind with the breath and keeps it there securely?" In other words, if you've learned lessons in your meditations, you want to be able to bring them to mind. You don't want to forget them.

Over time, this gets more and more instinctive, and less verbal. You have a sense that things are going well or not going well just by how they feel. But in the beginning, you have to be a little bit more articulate about it. If you've learned that long breathing is easy to stay with in the past, stay with long breathing now. See if that works this time. If it doesn't, you're going to learn something new. There are times when the long breathing works and times when it doesn't work. And when it doesn't work, what are you going to do? Try shorter breathing, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter.

This is where the evaluation comes in as you're checking to see what's working and what's not. The ability to evaluate things is really important. It's how you

govern yourself as a meditator. You can't have a teacher there, right in your ear, all the time whispering, "Now you do this, now you do that." You want to be able to remember the good lessons you've learned both from others and from your own practice. And if there are lessons you're not quite sure about, well, you file them away, and bring them out and put them to the test. You have to develop your own powers of observation, to see what's working and what's not—and how to know if something is working, and if something is not.

This takes time. And because it takes time, it also takes patience, which is a quality that we in the West seem to have thrown away. At the very least, we don't develop it much. Patience, of course, requires equanimity, the ability to step back from things and watch them, not to identify closely with things that are causing you to suffer. That requires the mindfulness to remember that you have the choice: If a feeling comes up in the mind and it seems really heavy, really painful, you do have the choice not to identify with it. You can identify just with the sense of the observer watching it. If you have no other techniques to use to counteract it, just be there watching, watching, watching.

And try to give that sense of the watcher at least one comfortable spot in the body to stay with. Because all too often, when there's an uncomfortable feeling in the mind, there's going to be an uncomfortable feeling in the body to go along with it. If you identify with both, you're going to feel overwhelmed. So you have to remember that there are places you can step out. You can still be in the body in the present moment, but there are other, more pleasant parts of the body you can inhabit. You can still be with your awareness in the present moment, but you don't have to identify with all the thoughts going through.

There's a passage in one of Ajaan MahaBua's talks where he's talking about how, after Ajaan Mun passed away, he was feeling really lost. Ajaan Mun had been the person he'd gone to for advice for eight years now, and now he had nobody to go to advice for. What was he going to do? He began remembering some of Ajaan Mun's teachings, and one stood out: "If anything comes up in the mind that you're not sure about—it might be risky to believe it or to follow through with it—just step back and stay with that sense of the knower, the observer. Don't get involved and eventually it will pass." That's good advice for any meditator anytime. Something comes up in the mind, you're not sure whether it's good or bad, well, just watch it. If you have techniques to know that this is not going to be a healthy thing to follow through with, and you have techniques for counteracting it, then go ahead and counteract it. But if you're not sure, just watch.

After all, that's how the Buddha learned. He didn't have teachers to show him the way. He tried things out and then he learned how to recognize when he had

made a mistake, and then he tried something different. And how did he know whether it was right or wrong? He developed the ability to watch, and as he was watching, he could ask a few questions: “Where does this lead? What does it do to the mind?” And over time, he gained a balanced sense of what’s skillful and what’s not.

The word “balance” here is really important. It’s like the difference between logic and reason. You can follow a principle logically, and carry it out to its a logical conclusion, and sometimes it’s crazy, totally out of balance. That’s because you’ve taken just one thing and run with it, without stopping to think, “Well, what other principles can apply here?” Reason is when you balance all the various principles that are relevant.

Again, a story from Ajaan MahaBua: He talks about how he was really determined that during the rains retreat never to accept any food that didn’t come directly from his own alms round. And he was getting very proud about it. Ajaan Mun noticed the pride, so every once in a while he would slip a little food into Ajaan MahaBua’s bowl. Because he was the teacher, he could do it. He was just pointing out, “You hold onto one principle, and sometimes another defilement springs up in its wake.” So you have to be on the alert for that. Sometimes when you’re really hard on yourself you get proud.

There’s also the problem of being really easy with yourself, and getting proud about that, too. I was reading recently about someone saying he’s learned how not to hold on either to the arahant ideal or to the bodhisattva ideal, because holding on, of course, creates difficulties and conflict. You get the sense that he feels that he’s higher than either of those ideals. Of course, the problem is he hasn’t even gotten anywhere near either of them. What’s needed is a sense of when to hold on and when to let go.

It’s like being a carpenter. Sometimes you hold onto your hammer, and sometimes you put the hammer down because you have to pick something else up, a chisel, say, or a plane. Then you know when to put that down and pick up something else in its place. You know when to make marks on the wood that you’re working with, and you know when the time comes to sand them off. In Pali this is called *kalaññuta*, having a sense of time, *mattaññuta*, having a sense of enough, *attaññuta*, having a sense of yourself, when you’re ready for something and when you’re not.

And although there are Pali words for these things, there’s no clear-cut formula for any of them. They’re things you have to learn over time by being observant, by noticing when a particular technique is helping you and when it’s not, and what you can do in its place. You learn ideas about these things from

other people, but you master them as skills by applying them yourself. And then if nothing is working you say, “Okay, let’s experiment a little bit here.” Which requires that you not to be too eager to jump to conclusions. Again with Ajaan Mun: Often he’d be off in the forest and he’d get visions of devas coming and telling him he should practice this way or not practice that way. That’d be pretty impressive: visions of devas coming and trying to help you. But he would always test these things. He wouldn’t immediately jump to the conclusions that that’s the way it had to be. Everything has to be tested.

And you have to train yourself to be a reliable experimenter, or a reliable reader of what’s going on. Again: patience, mindfulness, alertness, and the ability to step back. It’s in this way that you learn to monitor your own practice, evaluate your own practice. This means, of course, that the principle of evaluation is not just something for the practice of concentration. It should cover all of the aspects of your practice, as you evaluate what you’re doing, what you’re saying, what you’re thinking about, and then making adjustments as necessary. This is how you grow. This is how you mature as a meditator, as a person practicing the Dharma.

Ultimately, you reach the point where, as the texts say, you become independent in the Buddha’s teaching. In other words, you develop an all-around sense of these things, to the point where you can rely on yourself to make the adjustments, to make the corrections you need. Up to that point, you need the example of others to help keep you on course. Because the mind does have its tendencies—through the things it likes, or the things it’s averse to, or its fears, or its delusions—to go off course very easily.

This is why the Buddha set up the Sangha, so that there’s an apprenticeship. You not only listen to Dhamma talks, you also live with someone who’s been practicing the Dhamma so that you can pick up that person’s example. And when you internalize the lessons, there comes a point where you’re independent. But, until then, remember: You still have things to learn. And there’s always that question of how to bring things into balance: What’s the right time, what’s the right place? If there’s no teacher around, try at least to keep those questions in mind. What are you up for right now? What’s the appropriate task right now? What should you hold onto right now? What should you let go? Try to be alive to these questions all the time, and that can help protect you from a lot of wrong turns, making it more likely that you’re going to stay on course.