

Inner Critics

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When I was in France, there was a psychoanalyst who was a member of the group. He kept raising the question, “How can you trust yourself to observe yourself?” He was very committed to the idea that there’s a lot going on in the subconscious that you just don’t want to admit to yourself and you need somebody else to dig it out, or at least help you dig it out; to point it out to you. And I responded, “In the very beginning, you can’t trust yourself. That’s why you need to have a teacher.”

This is why the Buddha set up what is essentially an apprenticeship for passing along the Dhamma. You live together, and through living together, you get to know the teacher and the teacher gets to know you. This can provide an ideal situation for the teacher to point out where you’re being sloppy, where you’re being careless, where you’re broadcasting your defilements to everybody else in a way that you yourself don’t see, but everybody else can see, or at least the teacher can see.

The whole point of this training, though, is that you ultimately become able to see for yourself; you become a more reliable observer.

Both the French therapist and the Buddha saw the inner critic as someone who was always willing to give you a free pass, or at least would give you a free pass on some really important things where you didn’t deserve it. This is the opposite of the general assumption now in the States, where everybody in the psychotherapeutic business seems to say that your inner critic is harsh, your inner critic is overly scrupulous, and you have to learn how to turn the voice of the inner critic off. Whether this is cultural or what, I don’t know, but it is true that we tend not to see what our subconscious motives are and what our unskillful habits are.

An important part of the practice is learning how to admit them, first when they’re pointed out to you and then, secondly, when you can start seeing them yourself.

One of the reasons we meditate to get the mind still is to start seeing our own unskillful habits and to put the mind in a mood where it’s willing to admit them. This is why concentration is an important part of the path. But it’s not the whole path. Sometimes you hear the mistaken notion that when you reach a certain level of concentration you automatically attain a certain level of awakening. Well, you don’t. People can go through all the jhanas and all the formless states and still not see anything. They see enough in the mind to get the mind into those states, but that’s about it. One of the major delusions in modern Buddhism is that concentration in and of itself guarantees awakening. Still, it *is* part of the path and it’s one of the tools you need to use to see into your own faults.

That’s why we’re here: to see our own faults, to see where we’re causing suffering in ways that we haven’t admitted to ourselves and yet are pretty obvious, once you’re willing to take the

time and be open to the idea that, yeah, there are faults here. This is why the Buddha's prime requisites for someone who he was going to teach would be, one, that the person was observant and, two, the person was honest, willing to admit his or her faults. Those are the basic prerequisites for the training.

So we're here to make ourselves more observant, we're here to get the mind quiet. And for a lot of us, that right there is a huge accomplishment, a huge challenge. And we don't like to hear that once you've met that challenge, there's going to be more. But again, we're here why? Not to please somebody else, not to show someone else that we can attain a certain level. We're here because we're suffering. And at least part of us realizes that the suffering that really weighs the mind down is the suffering we're causing ourselves.

This is why a necessary part of being a practitioner is learning how to be a self-starter. In the beginning, learning about the Dhamma alerts you to the fact that the suffering that's weighing you down comes from within. And it's coming from things within yourself that you don't see. Part of the mind responds to that, and says, "Yeah, I've had enough of that. It makes no sense at all. I do things—I think I do things—for the sake of happiness, and yet I end up suffering. What's the reason? Why do I undercut the purpose of my efforts?" Well, it's our craving, our attachment, and our ignorance. Those are the things we've got to learn how to see through, the things we've got to learn how to abandon.

The problem is that we have many conflicting desires for happiness, many conflicting ideas about how happiness can be found, so they obscure what's actually going on. Part of you really wants a particular path of practice to lead to happiness and so you're willing to blind yourself to the unfortunate consequences. That's how things get driven underground. This is where your inner critic learns how to lie to you and gives you a free pass.

Then there's another part that wants to discourage you in your Dhamma practice. There may be some people in your life who've been especially harsh, and you've picked up their attitudes. You've picked up their ways of looking down on you and you take them on. That's something you've got to learn how to see through as well.

One of the themes that ran through the entire visit over there was the issue of the committee of the mind. One of the women, toward the end, commented that she began to see that there were basically three roles that members of her committee took on. One would be the performer, the second would be the stage setter, creating the situation in which the performer was going to perform. And then the third was the critic. And it's true: A lot of our committee members will fall into these three roles. This is what becoming is all about. The performer and the stage setter, that's what becoming is in the mind: your idea of who you are and the world in which you function, all of which grow out of your desire for a particular kind of happiness. And then there's a part of you that's judging whether this is working or not. A lot of our meditation is learning how to train that third member—the evaluator, the judge, the

critic—so that it's neither too lenient nor too harsh, so that it really is helpful for bringing about the end of suffering; bringing about the happiness you want.

Training these members is a purely internal issue, but you need help to begin with. As the Buddha once said, the whole of the practice is having admirable friends, i.e., people who will help point out where your inner committee members are lacking in one way or another and to set the right standards for how that inner critic is going to judge things. On the one hand, this means expanding your idea about what true happiness can be; raising it up. On the other hand, it means being skillful in learning how to move you in that direction.

So we do hold high standards here. As the Buddha once said, the secret to his awakening was two things. One was not resting content with skillful qualities. If he hadn't truly reached an end of suffering, he wasn't going to let himself rest. And the second was that he exerted relentless effort. He wouldn't give up, wouldn't give up. The part he doesn't mention there is the part where you have to learn how to pace yourself. This is largely a matter of trial and error: how far you can push yourself, when you have to rest. And when you can push yourself again, and when you have to rest again.

This is another one of the reasons why we practice concentration: to give the mind a place where it can rest so that it's not just stressing and straining all the time. That way, its way of finding rest in the midst of the path is not just to go off and indulge in your old bad habits. Instead, it gives you a better place to rest; a better place to gather your energies and provide a good foundation for that inner critic so that it becomes a wise critic, a wise observer—someone who gives helpful criticism, constructive criticism; someone who's actually on the team. This way you strengthen the subset of the committee that really does want to put an end to suffering and is willing to do whatever is needed and really does see that the Buddha's standards for happiness are the ones that you genuinely want to take on, that you're not going to let yourself rest content with anything less.

This is what having the self as a governing principle is all about. You've come this far in the path. It would be a shame to backslide, to go back for the pleasures that you had abandoned—or worse—and to try to content yourself with a lower level of happiness.

So it's a complex matter, this training of the inner critic. On the one hand, you don't want one who will simply cut things short and say, "I've got concentration. That's good enough for me. I'm willing to stop here. I've hit the fourth jhana. That's plenty." And you don't want the other extreme who's browbeating you for not reaching the fourth jhana and browbeating you so much that you give up hope. Those are the ones you want to get rid of, both the indulgent critic and the destructive critic.

You want to find a constructive critic; train the constructive critic inside. And it's there. There are parts of your life where you've already taken on the role of the constructive critic of your own behavior and you've really benefitted. So figure out: Where did you put that constructive critic and how do you get it on board in the practice? Get so that it helps all

various parts of the path to come together, to work together: the sense of calm that comes from the concentration; the insight that comes from your abilities to be observant and truthful with yourself; and the willingness to put in whatever effort is needed to bring all these factors to completion. It's a tall order. But it's not superhuman. There's nothing in the Buddha's teachings that lies beyond the capacities of human beings. It's simply a matter of deciding that you've had enough of causing yourself suffering and that you genuinely do want to find a way out.