

Judging Your Meditation

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There is such a thing as a meditation session that goes well and a meditation session that goes not so well. It's important to state that because all too often you hear that there is no such thing as good or bad meditation, or that there's no room for judgment or evaluation in the meditation. But unless you recognize a session that goes well and a session that doesn't go so well, you're never going to develop the meditation as a skill—and that's what it is. It *is* a skill and you've got to learn how to judge it—but you have to learn how to judge it wisely.

Maybe one of the reasons so many teachers say there is no such thing as a good or bad meditation is because they know people tend to judge themselves unwisely. Their judgments simply get in the way. Learning how to judge the meditation is a skill in and of itself. Eventually, evaluation becomes part of the concentration practice. It's one of the factors of the first jhana. As when you first sit down to look at your breath, you've got to evaluate: Does the breath feel good? Does it not feel good? What would feel better? When you choose a point to focus on, which spot is going to be most congenial?

You've got to learn how to judge these things. So it's good to keep in mind some important principles about judging as it applies to the meditation. The first one is that you're judging actions; you're not here to judge yourself as to whether you're a good person or a bad person, a good meditator or bad meditator, talented or hopeless. That's not the issue. The issue is: What are you doing right now? What are the results? Are they good enough, or could they be better?

You start out by assuming that the breath could be more comfortable. But if you find that you're putting pressure on it to make it more comfortable and that's making it worse, you back off a bit. You say, "Well, let's sit with this breath." Don't be too demanding of the breath. After all, you breathe in and breathe out and can have a reasonable amount of comfort. Allow that to be there for a while, and then let it develop without too much direction on your part. See where it goes. Just ask yourself each time you breathe in, "What would the body like right now?" and see how it responds.

Now, because you're judging actions, you have to remember the principle of karma. Some of the things you're experiencing right now are the result of present actions, and some are the result of past actions. They don't come with little labels saying this is the result of what you did yesterday afternoon, or this is the result of

what you did last week. So if things aren't going well, don't immediately decide that it's because you're doing something wrong right now.

Maybe some past habit has gotten stirred up and is showing its results right now. Particularly when obstructive thoughts come in, thoughts that would pull you away: The fact that they're coming up may not be the result of what you're doing right now. But you do have a choice. Are you going to go with them or not? That choice is your present action. You can ask yourself: "Where is this thought going? What can I do with it? Is this something that I can lead in a good direction? Or do I just want to put it aside?"

There will be times when the meditation seems to be bombarded with thoughts, and you spend the whole session just learning how to let go, let go, let go. But don't write it off as a bad session. If you have been able to let go of these thoughts as they bombard you, that's a useful skill. It also helps to develop equanimity in the face of things you can't change. Equanimity doesn't mean you just get indifferent toward everything. You get indifferent toward the things you can't have an effect on, and you focus your energy on the things that you can—an important lesson in discernment.

Also, because we're judging actions here, you have to remember that the Buddha's teachings on karma are very complex, which means that when things are going well, you can't expect that the meditation is going to be a nice, smooth curve just getting better and better all the time. Or when things are not going well—they seem to be going down—it's not the case that it's just going to keep on going further down. Your meditation can switch direction very quickly.

So when things are going well, don't get complacent. Try to be alert to see how you can best maintain whatever is going well and be on the lookout for things that might change it. At the same time, when things are *not* going well, don't get down or depressed. Remember that you can learn from mistakes. In fact, that's how we learn most often. We make a mistake and then we recognize it as a mistake. This is where it's important that you judge it as an action and the result of action rather than as an indication of what kind of meditator you are. If your idea of your "self" gets involved, it's going to skew your perception. And it can work both ways.

In other words, when things are not going well, you take it as a sign that this might reflect badly on you, and then you deny that it's not going well. But when things are going well and you're the type of person who tends not to trust things when they go well, you think that the bad side of you is the more reliable, the more trustworthy side. In other words, you can trust yourself when you're down on yourself, and you don't trust yourself when you're feeling positive. That attitude can get in the way of recognizing when things are actually going well. So

try to get your ideas about your self out of the picture, and just look at the action in and of itself. Learn how to read what's a good meditation and what's not a good meditation by what you're doing.

The issue of knowing yourself does come in when you try to figure out what your strengths and weaknesses are. You probably know a lot about yourself already from your efforts to develop other skills. You realize that you've got some strengths and some weaknesses. Sometimes they're the two sides of one thing. In other words, if you tend to be very self-critical, that's both good and bad: good in the sense that it allows you to see where things are not going well, and bad in the sense that it can keep you discouraged. You have the idea, "It's never going to go well." That's not helpful at all. Being very confident also has its good and bad sides. The good side, of course, is that you have the energy to keep at things. The down side is you tend to overestimate how well you're doing.

So there is that element of knowing yourself—*attaññutta*, they call it in Pali—and realizing that you have to make compensation. It's like knowing that you're nearsighted, so you get some glasses that correct for nearsightedness. If you know you have a habit of coming down too hard on yourself, learn how to compensate. If you know you tend to be too confident, learn how to compensate for that as well.

In other words, you're not thinking of yourself as a good or bad meditator. It's just a matter of knowing that you have certain tendencies and you've got to compensate for them. And what are the tendencies? They're actions, habitual actions. You have to learn other actions to compensate. It keeps coming back to action again.

Another problem in judging the meditation, of course, is when you start judging your meditation against somebody else's. You hear that so-and-so is doing well. They've got this level of concentration; you don't have that level of concentration. You have to remember: That person's mind is that person's mind; your mind is your mind. It's like comparing yourself to other people in the doctor's waiting room. There's no contest as to who has the most interesting disease, or who has the most advanced disease or whatever. We all have our diseases, and the fact that your meditation is subject to ups and downs can apply to other people's meditation as well. So there's no need to get down when they're doing well and you're not.

At the same time, when you're doing well and other people are not, that's also not a time to compare yourself. As the Buddha said, when someone thinks, "I've got the first jhana. Nobody else around here has the first jhana. I've got this; I've got that. Nobody else has this," that's a sign of a person of a no integrity or

maturity. As soon as that thought comes in, the thought in and of itself destroys whatever attainment you had right then and there. As soon as you construe yourself around these attainments, the state of mind has already turned into something else.

So you're here working on your issues, and other people are working on their issues. And you never know. When I was first studying with Ajaan Fuang, there were a couple of people who had really amazing visions about all kinds of things. Of course, I was envious: "Why can't I have visions, too?" But then I began to notice they had other problems in their meditation that I didn't have. It all balanced out in the end.

Then there's the problem of comparing your meditation to what you've read in the books. There are some descriptions of meditation that are like recipes, and there are others that are more like restaurant reviews. The recipes tell you how to do it, and those are useful for giving you practical ideas. The restaurant reviews are the ones that say first jhana's like this; second jhana's like that; third jhana is like that—all down the line. The Canon describes how nice they are and makes them sound like the meditation has a nice, neat little progression. But those descriptions are basically there to give you a sense of what, eventually, you'll be measuring yourself against. But you can't take the descriptions as a guide how to do them.

In other words: Take directed thought and evaluation. Throw a little rapture in. Throw a little pleasure in, a little singleness in. You've got the first jhana? No. It's like hearing about durian. You hear that durian has this smell and this taste. It's kind of like custard, but it's also kind of like garlic, and it's got some cyanide. So you mix all those things together. But you don't get durian; you get a mess. For durian, you plant a durian seed in soil and in a climate that'll help it grow. Then when the fruit comes, you can taste it and know.

Those descriptions of jhana are for you to think about after you've come out of the meditation. You think about where you were and what the mind was like. Does that resemble anything you've heard of before? If it seems to resemble what's in the Canon, put a post-it note on it. Don't be too quick to name things, because you're not here to explore the texts. You're here to explore your mind. And as you're exploring it, one of the problems is that you don't know how far it can go.

They say there are eight jhanas. How do you measure the eight steps? Do you know you've gotten on the first one? And how about the next step? Sometimes there will be slight changes, and you might over-interpret them—or you might miss them. So you don't know how many steps you've got, or even if you've gotten on the stairway.

So for the time being, just carry a little pad of post-it notes in your pocket. Say, “Well, this *seems* like the first jhana, and this seems like the second.” But as you get to know the territory better, you get to the point when you know what the possibilities are. You know how many steps there are, and you know where they are. That’s when you can rearrange the notes. But don’t think about that while you’re meditating. Your topic of the meditation is the breath; it’s not the description of jhana in the books.

It’s the same as when you think about how the meditation used to be better, and now it’s on a downhill slope. But the topic for tonight is not how good the meditation was last week; the topic for tonight is how your breath is right now. If last week had really been good, then it wouldn’t have deteriorated. So come back and start all over again. Try to be more careful in your powers of observation this time. While you’re here, make the breath your focus. If you’re going to compare anything, compare this breath with the next breath, with the next breath. See how you can best settle down.

It’s in this way that you learn how to use your powers of observation and your powers of judgment in a way that actually helps the meditation—and that actually becomes an integral part of the skill you’re trying to develop.