

Judging Your Efforts

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If you've ever done any writing, you know that you have to take on two roles. There's the creator and there's the editor, and you can't really play both roles at once. In writing things down, jotting down your ideas, you have to get the editor out of the way so that the writer has space to create. Then you bring the editor in to do some organizing. Then the creator has to write again and then the editor comes back and looks at what you've written. When you're creating, you have to be willing to run with whatever comes up to see how far it goes. When you're the editor, you can be pretty vicious, slashing here, slashing there, learning to admit to yourself that certain ideas just don't work. They've got to go.

When you're meditating, you have to play the same two roles, and again they have to alternate. We're trying to create a state of concentration here. In fact, all the factors of the path are created. You create right view. You create right resolve. You bring these things into being. That's what *bhavana* means. But then you also have to evaluate them. This is where two qualities become very important.

One quality, ardency, is mentioned under the teachings on right mindfulness. As Ajaan Lee points out in the context of right mindfulness, ardency is the wisdom factor, which is interesting because you sometimes hear that *sampajañña*, alertness, is the wisdom factor. But that's not the case: The wisdom lies in wanting and trying to do this well. It's in learning how to do it well that you develop your wisdom, figuring out what works and what doesn't work.

Figuring out what works and what doesn't work is the role of evaluation, the second quality, which is the wisdom factor in right concentration. You stay with the breath for a while and then you figure it out: Is it working well or not? If it's not working well, you've got to figure out what will work better. And the more precise your powers of evaluation, the better the meditation gets. But both the ardency and the evaluation have to be built on the willingness to judge when something is not working and not get knocked over by that fact.

To really be a reliable judge of things, you have to not let yourself get upset when things are not going well. Otherwise, you start skewing the judgment, and it can go in different ways. One way is not admitting to yourself when there's a problem; that, of course, leads to bigger problems down the line. When the bigger problems hit, you start getting discouraged and you end up taking your powers of evaluation and turning them on yourself, which is not skillful. You need the ability to bounce back, even when the judgment is harsh. Make sure, though, that

the judgment is not harsh on you; it's simply harsh on what you're doing. Try to get "you" out of the picture as much as possible. Just enter into the action, enter into the activity here of trying to mold the mind into concentration.

This works on many levels. At the very beginning, just try to stay with the breath. You may have been with the breath many times in the past when it worked out well, but today it's not working out so well. What do you do? You go back to the beginning. A lot of people don't like that. It's very discouraging. You keep finding yourself back at the beginning where you were before—but that's how you see things clearly. Maybe this time around, going back to the beginning, you'll see something that you've been missing as you've gone through the early stages before. Some of the best books on Dhamma are the ones that try to go back to the really basic principles of the Dhamma and look at them with fresh eyes.

Ajaan Lee has a nice passage where he says that a lot of people confuse high level Dhamma with low and low level Dhamma with high. In other words, the basics are where all the action is. It's like learning how to play the piano. There's a lot to be learned simply in playing your scales. Of course, everybody wants to jump past that to get to the real music, but a cleanly played scale is something really nice and it requires a lot of skill. Then, of course, you can transfer that skill to the music, but you have to be willing to go back when need be. Realize that if the music's not going very well, maybe you have to go back and do your scales again.

An important part of the practice is learning to keep your spirits up, realizing that everybody has setbacks. I've told you the story before of the woman I knew who went to study pottery with a living national treasure in Japan. She was getting discouraged. She'd put her pots into the kiln and they'd come out all misshapen and burned, whereas his were coming out perfect every time, every time, until one morning she came to the shed and his pots had been ruined. He was there in the kiln trying to figure out why, and she realized then that that was what made him a living national treasure: not that he was already perfect, but that he was always willing to learn and he didn't take a setback as a personal affront or anything to be discouraged about.

There's another lesson. When things aren't going well and you look at the passages in the Canon where the ideal meditator goes from this jhana to the next one to the next one and then gains awakening, it all seems very neat and orderly, but then you look at your practice and it seems to be wandering all over the place, sometimes getting worse than it was before you had ever practiced. That's when you've got to realize that the mind is very complex. It's a lot more complex than pottery, and things can come up that may not have come up before. You've been

able to get past them in the past, but this time they've got you. Okay, you take this as a lesson to learn. You always stick with the resolve that you want to learn how to do this skillfully, and part of the skill is bringing the right attitude towards your mistakes.

This is why the Buddha made this part of his lesson to Rahula at the very beginning of the practice. After all, you try not to make mistakes, you try not to do anything harmful, but if you do, this is what you do: You admit to yourself that you made a mistake. Go talk it over with someone who's more advanced in the practice to get some tips from that person. This way, you learn how to be a more reliable observer of yourself and you're willing to be quite open about the fact that there are mistakes. You're not too proud to want to learn, because it's your pride that's the problem here. When there's a setback, that's what gets wounded: your pride.

So learn how not to identify with your pride. This is where it gets tricky because sometimes that's what keeps you going, what keeps you motivated: the sense that you want to do this well. You want to develop a skill that you can take pride in, but actually the best thing to take pride in, if you're going to be really skillful, is to take pride in the fact that you're always willing to admit a mistake and to learn from it. That becomes necessary, because if you're too proud to admit your mistake, you can't learn from it.

When the mistake seems huge—when your mind is going for days and days and just doesn't want to settle down—don't just give up. Remember there are lots of things to develop here, not just concentration. There's a whole range of *paramis*, a whole range of perfections. Sometimes you have to work on the perfection of endurance, the perfection of persistence, or right effort, generating desire, upholding your intent, activating your persistence. These are skills of attitude and they're as crucial as anything else in developing the mind. And remember: We're working on a duty here. We're not just here for a good time.

Ajaan Chah has a nice passage where he says that when the meditation is going well, you do it because it's your duty. When it's not going well, you still try to do it because it's your duty. Now, these duties aren't imposed by anyone—aside from the fact of suffering, which is what imposes them—that and the fact that this is the only way out. The mind's sense of its duties in some schools of psychology is called your superego, and in a lot of cultures the superego can be pretty punitive. It sets up extremely high standards without regard to whether you can actually live up to them or not. And the standards seem to have very little to do with whether fulfilling them is actually going to make you happy.

But the Buddha's superego is very humane. It's there for the purpose of your true happiness—to help you in your search for a way out of suffering, to help end your bewilderment. This is what you've got to do, and the trick with any duty is to learn how to make yourself want to do it.

There's a German poet, Schiller, who made a nice distinction. He noticed that there are times when you have a sense of your duty and it's easy to do. He called that grace. At other times, you have a sense of your duty and it's hard. There's something inside that gets in the way. He says your ability to get yourself to do what you know you should be doing in spite of that something: That's dignity. So try to bring some dignity to your practice. It's different from pride. As we sort through all the ups and downs of our practice, learning that distinction is a really important key to survival.