

Evaluation: The Voice of Heedfulness

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Take some long, deep in-and-out breaths, and get in touch with the feeling of the breath in the body. Here by “breath,” we don’t mean the air coming in and out of the lungs. We mean more the flow of energy in the body. And it’s important that you stay in contact with that direct experience. It’s the part of the body that’s closest to the mind, closest to your awareness. This energy flow is what allows you to sense other qualities in the body. Without this, there’d be no connection between body and mind. The body would be dead. The mind would be off someplace else.

So the breath is a good place to watch both the body and the mind. You’re going to try to keep them together. If long breathing feels good, you keep it up. If it doesn’t, you can change. This is where you bring in the quality called evaluation. You try different ways of breathing: shorter, longer, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster, slower, or in long out short, in short out long. Or you can tell yourself you’re going to do the in-breath; let the body do the out-breath on its own, so you’re not squeezing things too much. Then you try to figure out what kind of breathing is good for the body right now. What feels best? And what does the body need? If it’s tired, can you breathe in a way that’s energizing? If you’re tense, can you breathe in a way that’s more relaxing? If there are pains in the body, can you breathe in a way that’s soothing for the pains?

This is something you have to evaluate for yourself. No one can get into your breath and tell you what to do. So it’s up to you to decide what kind of breathing you like and watch for a while to see if it really is good, because something may feel good for a couple breaths but then not so good over the long term. You’re free to change. You haven’t committed to one way of breathing for the hour.

And this back and forth—trying things out, then evaluating, then trying out your conclusions—is a really important part of getting the mind to settle down, because you’re trying to get the mind to fit with the breath, the breath to fit with the mind. At the same time, you’re developing your own powers of judgment, your own discernment. You’re developing the voice in the mind that tells you what to try and then comments on what you’ve done. You’re trying to train this voice to be healthy.

All too many of us have very unhealthy voices in the mind that pass judgment, but this voice, when it’s properly trained, is the voice of heedfulness. It tells you that there are dangers out there—and more importantly, dangers inside you—but

you can avoid them if you act skillfully. That, the Buddha said, is the basis for all skillful behavior. It's not that we're innately good. And, of course, he doesn't say we're innately bad. But the reason we behave well is because we see there's a need for it. If we don't behave well, there's going to be danger.

Some people don't like the idea of being motivated by danger, but that's what underlies a lot of our activities, so we should learn how to have a clear sense of what really is dangerous and what's not, because this judging voice in the mind may have picked up all kinds of standards—from your family, from the media, from friends—that are really unhealthy for you. So you've got to train this voice. This is the voice that's going to train you, so you've got to train it well. It's good to think of it as a chorus of voices, some of which speak in unison, while others speak at cross purposes. You've got to sort out which ones you're going to listen to.

So start with something really simple like this, and look for the voice that encourages you: This is something that's going to be good for you, and this is something you can do.

The Buddha doesn't tell you to stop your judging voice. He certainly doesn't tell you to drown it by trying to forget it one way or another. He says you've got to train it, because there's a wise intention behind this commentator, which is that there are dangers out there and you've got to be careful in how you act because there are dangers in here, dangers in the mind itself. So that much is true. Then the question is: What are the *real* dangers, and how can you best deal with them?

This is where the Buddha provides training for this voice. It starts with simple things like being generous, being virtuous, holding to the precepts, none of which are particularly hard to do. They may go against your old habits, which makes them seem hard but, in and of themselves, not killing and not stealing make life a lot easier. No illicit sex, no lying, no intoxicants: That makes life a lot easier.

At the same time, as you hold to the precepts, you're developing mindfulness and alertness, qualities you're going to need to get the mind to settle down: mindful to keep the precept in mind in all your activities, and alert to make sure you're actually following it. Alertness here is what's going to turn into your voice of evaluation as the mind gets into concentration. You're teaching it to be alert to the good things you can do and to the bad things you've got to avoid. As you build a sense of confidence around the fact that you can hold to the precepts, it gives you more confidence to stick with the meditation when it's difficult, to believe in yourself that "Yes, this is something I can do." And the voice is pretty much the same here.

Once you've learned the lessons from meditation, the mind has to watch over it and make sure you stick with the breath. Don't go wandering off to something

else. If you do wander off, that little voice has to say, “Okay, go back.” It doesn’t have to yell at you to make you go back, and it doesn’t have to criticize you when you’ve wandered off. It just says, “Go back. This is not what you want.” You get back to the breath, and then you can reward yourself. What kind of breathing would feel better? It doesn’t have to be too much. Just one really good breath. Of course, once you’ve had the one good breath, you say, “Well, why not another one? And then another one?” In this way, you train the voice to be friendly.

When Freud analyzed people’s minds, he concluded that we had a superego that’s always telling us what we should do. And the standards of the superego that Freud found in his patients were pretty severe. Some people had superegos that said, “You can’t do anything right.” And a lot of these ideas were picked up from a culture where the basic religion was not there for the sake of your happiness. It was there for the sake of your obedience. But the duties the Buddha teaches you are something else entirely. They’re for the sake of your true happiness. To put an end to suffering, to comprehend suffering, to abandon its cause, to realize its cessation by developing the path: Those are all duties in your favor, good duties to hold to, so those are the duties you want to take as your standard.

Then you engage in feedback. Watching the mind, if it’s getting off course, you warn it about the fact that it’s getting off course, so that you can bring it back. If it’s getting too excessive, remember that this is a middle path. We’re trying to find the point of just the right amount of effort, just the right amount of pressure on your mind, pressure on the breath, to keep you here. If things are getting excessive, you can lighten up. Or if you’re excessively loose, you can tighten them up. But you’ve got to train this voice, because this is the voice of heedfulness that reminds you that you want to do this well.

So it’s not like we’re trying to abandon the judging mind. Instead, you’ve got to train the judging mind so that it’s on your side. And keep these duties in mind. The training starts out with the precepts: avoid unskillful activity, pursue skillful activity. And then that translates into the duties for the four noble truths. Those are your standards. They’re friendly standards. And they’re safe standards, because they make sure that you are heedful, but heedful of the right things, protective of the right things.

So don’t try to run away from this voice. Learn how to train it, and it in turn will turn around and train you well.