Judicious vs. Judgmental

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We’re often told to turn off our inner critic and just go with something. Trust our intuition. Trust our creative ideas. But meditation doesn’t work that way. You have to have an inner critic. The issue is how to train the inner critic to be a good critic. Rather than simply a destructive one, or a lazy one, or an inattentive one, or an intermittent one. It comes down to that old issue of the difference between being judgmental and being judicious. You want to have a very judicious inner critic to look at how things are going in the practice so you can develop a sense of balance. To develop that balance is probably one of the most important skills you have to develop as a meditator. And it’s one of the more difficult ones. If you’re riding a bicycle, it’s easy to tell when you have your balance and when you’ve lost your balance. Working with the mind, it’s more difficult, because the mind is a much more complex phenomenon. Another way of thinking about it is that we’re learning a skill here that we’re not necessarily good at. Many of us have never really had to learn those skills. As a result, we don’t know how to learn to do something we’re not yet good at. So it takes an extra amount of being observant, an extra willingness to make mistakes, in order to develop that sense of how to learn. The Buddha lists four qualities that are important for learning, which are important for any skill—desire, persistence, intent, and vipassana, which is difficult to translate. It can mean ingenuity, it can mean circumspection, sort of the active, analytical side of the mind. In each case, the Buddha said, it’s important that you learn how to balance these qualities. When there’s too much desire, too little desire, too much effort, too little effort, being too focused, not being focused enough, being too analytical, and not analytical enough. Unfortunately, he doesn’t give us any clear guidelines, because that’s something we have to learn for ourselves. To learn, we have to be willing to make mistakes. We can’t simply come and ask for a simple three or four word formula that will take us through any situation. Think of any skill that you’ve learned. It always requires a sense of balance. When you’re cooking, how much salt is too much salt? How much salt is too little salt? How much heat is too much? How much heat is too little? How do you learn these things? You can read it in the cookbooks, but that doesn’t really teach you. You have to learn to look for the signs. Same with music. How much practice is too much practice? How much practice is too little practice? You have to learn to look for the signs. All too often, there’s no book to tell you. It’s even more so when we come to the meditation. Desire. We all want to get results. We all want to be good meditators. But exactly how much desire is appropriate for us at our current level of skill, our current level of ability? How much persistence is appropriate for us? Sometimes we read really stirring dharma talks, really stirring books. We want to go out there and devote ourselves 24/7 to the meditation. After a while, we find that it begins to get dry. You can’t go simply on effort or desire alone. You have to learn how to gauge your effort, what you’re capable of, and at the same time not be too willing to slide back and let yourself off too easy. How much is too easy? How much is too hard? That you have to learn for yourself. It’s like developing proper pitch. You have to develop your ear. Look for the signs. When things start getting too frazzled, or when it seems that distracting thoughts are just too easily coming in, those are signs of too much, too little effort, too much, too little persistence. But each of us has his or her own signs. We have to watch for them, which means giving time to the meditation. Learning how to balance your desire for results with a realistic appraisal of where your abilities are right now. And also how to deal with the mind that wants results too fast. To deal with a mind that tends to throw itself into things and then burn out. You have to learn how to pace yourself. What this means is when you find that the meditation is beginning to get dry, you’ve been putting too much effort into it, you can learn how to relax without totally abandoning the practice. It’s something they call “recovery mode.” In any skill, there come periods when you can just push, push, push, and you’re really getting results. And then after a while, for some reason, the rhythm has to change. You’ve reached as far as you can really push yourself at that point. So you back up a little bit, but you don’t totally abandon what you’re doing. You try to maintain that inner sense of the observer, the inner sense of mindfulness. Go do something else, but make it part of the practice of mindfulness. There are always plenty of chores to be done around the monastery. There’s no end to them. We could be working on the chores all day long, every day. It’s still not got them done. So there’s always something to do. And as long as it’s meritorious, as long as it’s good for the mind, you’re developing good qualities in the mind, it’s a fine thing to do. Just try to stay mindful. Try to keep that stance inside, the stance of watching. In other words, when the mind gets so tied up in being tied to the practice, it’s beginning to feel constricted, give it some freedom. Give it some choices. Make sure they’re all good choices. But simply that sense of having a choice of what to do. Many times you find you want to choose to go back to meditate without feeling constricted. This principle works on an inner level as well, the kind of concentration that gets really fixated on one point, to the exclusion of everything else in the body. That sometimes is a useful practice. But not consistently, not always. You also need times when there’s a more broadened awareness in the body, which gives you a greater sense of freedom, so the breath doesn’t feel so constricted, so the mind doesn’t feel so worn out by a particular technique. So you have to learn to get a sense of the mind’s rhythms, what it needs now. Learn how to give it choices so it doesn’t feel confined in the practice. Look at all the different meditation themes that the Buddha teaches. If you get tired of the breath, there are other things you can think about, other things you can focus on. Learn how to play with the meditation. It’s not all work. Remember how much can be learned by playing. How many great guitarists have come from simply somebody fooling around on a guitar for a while, not necessarily doing what they’re supposed to do, but still with the guitar, playing this, playing that, trying this, trying that, and something new comes out of it. Have that same element of play in your meditation. It’s something to be enjoyed. John Fuhring once said that meditation without rapture is like a machine without lubricant. The parts grind against each other. The friction builds up. The heat builds up. After a while, the whole thing seizes up. There’s got to be that sense of lubrication. There’s got to be that sense of ease and well-being. Simply make sure that the ease and well-being is in the dharma, is in the mindfulness, is in the concentration, is in the concentration. So it comes down to those principles that John Fuhring used to stress so much. Be observant. Use your imagination. Play with the meditation. Learn to develop a judicious critic insight. Or if you want to think of training the mind just like training a child, learn to develop a wise parent insight. When the mind starts getting strepharous and recalcitrant, ask yourself, “What would a wise parent do in this case?” And the voice of that wise parent, the decisions of that wise parent, those become your teacher. That becomes your judicious inner critic, the one that, instead of getting in the way of the meditation and destroying the meditation, really helps the process along. If you have a critic that sees you make a mistake and says, “You’re hopeless,” that’s not a critic. That’s not a useful critic at all. That’s not a useful observation. We’re not here to pass judgment on ourselves or to deal in recrimination. It’s just to simply notice, “Well, that didn’t go very well. Let’s try something else.” Or, “That did go well. Let’s see if we can keep it going. Let’s see how we can make it better.” Be careful not to push it too hard and not to push it too little. Again, you’re going to push it too hard and push it too little. It’s ordinary, normal. John Munwen said that in teaching the Middle Way, it’s normal that we’re going to go on either side of the Middle Way for quite a while, swinging back and forth, back and forth. But as you learn from the back-and-forth swings, that’s what puts you on the middle path. So expect that you’re going to make mistakes, but also have the attitude that allows you to pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and get back to work. Learn from your mistakes. Over time, that inner parent becomes more and more wise. The inner critic becomes more and more judicious. It may not be absolutely wise or judicious to begin with, but it heads in that direction. This is how valuable things develop. They take time. And not simply time, they take being observant as well.

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