Evaluation

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One of the really distinctive features of the Buddhist teachings is the extent to which he encourages you to use your own powers of evaluation. He doesn’t tell you simply to believe him. He doesn’t tell you to stop thinking, stop questioning. He encourages you to question. He encourages you to think. But he also gives you advice on how to do it in a skillful way. He starts out with things that are close to you, things that are part of your everyday life. He says, “Look at the way you’re generous. Look at the way you behave. Look around at other people and see what happens as a result of your actions. Look at your intentions and look at the results of your actions.” That’s what he told his son in his very first Dhamma lesson that we have recorded of his lessons to his son Rahula. Look at your intentions, look at your actions, and look at what happens as a result. Does it really lead to happiness or does it not? Learn to see these connections for yourself. Learn to evaluate them. So it’s ironic that as Buddhism has come to the West, many times it comes as a meditation technique which discourages people from thinking. Either you’re told to try to get away from your conceptual mind or your logical mind, or you’re told to be non-reactive, or you’re told just to note without thinking about anything. But that doesn’t do justice to the way the Buddha taught meditation. Instead of tying your hands, he gives you lots of tools in meditation, lots of topics that you can meditate on for different elements of the mind. And his instructions on right, wrong, right, right concentration, he starts out with direct thought and evaluation. One of the factors of awakening is analysis of qualities, basically looking at the events in the mind and seeing which ones are skillful and which ones are unskillful, trying to make you sensitive to the fact that whatever comes to your mind is going to have an effect. It’s not just that things come and go, but they also either produce happiness or else they produce pain. And you want to observe that. That’s the big issue. That’s where he points your attention. He says, “Focus your powers of evaluation here.” Then he has you apply that to the practice of meditation. You focus on the breath. Think about the breath and evaluate it. Is this a good, comfortable breath to stay with? Does it feel good being with the breath? If it doesn’t, you can change. No one’s standing over you with a whip, telling you not to change, not to do anything, or just accept whatever’s there. After all, you’ve had a hand in creating whatever is there. If you want to disentangle yourself from whatever suffering is involved in that, you first have to learn how to create skillful things. Learn how to create pleasure in the present moment. There are lots of ways you can do this. You can adjust the breath in terms of its length. You can make it deeper or more shallow, heavier or lighter. You can think of the breath as energy. Energy throughout the whole body, out through every pore, coming in and going out. You can focus anywhere in the body and see how it works. How else do you think discernment is going to arise? It’s not a matter of putting your mind through the meat grinder. It’s simply a matter of being very sensitive to what you’re doing and learning how to evaluate the results, and simply becoming more and more sensitive as you go along. In that way, discernment comes. Not simply from following instructions, but it comes from developing your own powers of sensitivity, catching yourself doing unskillful things that you didn’t notice before and realizing that you have a choice not to do them that way. The only way you’re going to see this is to develop your powers of evaluation. Put those teachings on “seeing for yourself,” which start at the very beginning. You’ve probably heard of the Discourse to the Kalamas, where the Buddha said, “Don’t go by what you’ve heard. Don’t go by what you’ve read. Also, don’t go by what you’ve reasoned out on your own. Look and see what actually gives results, what is skillful, what mental states lead to happiness, and what mental states lead to suffering.” Take that as your standard. That standard gets carried all the way through the practice. If the mind has trouble settling down, well, look and see what you’re doing. Is it because you’re trying to anticipate things too much? Or is it because you have memories of times in the past when it was good, and today is not quite as good as it was in the past, and you’re getting upset about that? If you see that happening, just let that particular thought go. You don’t have to knit it into your meditation. Let it be a loose strand that just floats away. Anything else that comes up in the meditation that you find causes stress—the way you focus on pain, the way you deal with distracting thoughts—the Buddha gives you lots of ways of dealing with these things. And it’s up to you to decide which particular strategy, which particular technique is going to work right now. Sometimes thoughts come up in the mind and he says, “You’ve got to work through them.” In other words, you have to consciously figure out ways of sidestepping the thought, or banishing the thought, or ignoring the thought. Or placing it with a better thought. Relaxing around the formation of that thought. There are other times he says, “Simply watch.” And he doesn’t give instructions as to which technique to use at which time. It’s up to you to observe, up to you to figure out. And in the course of doing that, you develop your powers of evaluation. So it’s not that the Buddha would tie you down to one technique. He gives you many. And he wants you to learn how to be good at all of them, so that you can develop your own powers of evaluation. Because what happens as a result is that you get more and more sensitive to what you’re doing, to the results, and you begin to act in terms of your words, in terms of your physical actions, in terms of your thoughts, with more and more finesse. You create less suffering for yourself, and your powers of sensitivity grow more and more refined. The actions you do in the present moment become more and more refined as well. So ultimately, they reach a point where there’s nothing to do. The mind reaches a point of equilibrium where it realizes that if it did anything at all, it would be causing suffering one way or another. Even if it forbade itself to do anything, that would cause itself suffering. Stress. Very slight stress, but still there. That’s when the mind reaches a point of what they call non-fashioning. And that’s where it opens up to another dimension entirely. That’s where you can stop knitting in your meditation. You reach this point of cessation, not by slamming on the brakes or by putting the mind in a box. You do it by learning how to be more and more sensitive in how you evaluate your actions and their results. You do this by focusing on the Buddha’s question, “What are you doing that’s causing suffering? What are you doing that’s causing stress?” And the second one is, “What techniques do you have for causing less stress?” And it’s good to have a wide range of possibilities, or a wide-ranging sense of the possibilities that you have at hand, so that your awareness of the mind’s movements and its actions and the results of its actions gets more and more all around. So that nothing escapes your notice. So remember this when the meditation begins to seem confining, that you’ve probably forgotten some of the techniques that the Buddha offers. Try to remind yourself of the broad range of techniques. When it begins to get dry, you can think thoughts of goodwill, compassion, sympathetic joy or appreciation or equanimity. When you get discouraged, you can think about members of the Sangha in the past who seem to have reached a dead end in their own meditation and then they were able to break through. Reflection on the Buddha, the Dhamma, the Sangha, reflection on death for when you’re lazy. Contemplation of the body when you’re feeling lustful. The Buddha offers lots of techniques, and in every case he wants you to use your powers of evaluation to see what works. That way, insight is not the result of a mechanical process of sticking the mind on an assembly line and hoping that it comes out at the little door marked “insight.” Instead, it’s more of an all-around process. The Buddha gives you lots of tools and encourages you to become skillful at figuring out this one issue. What can you do to put an end to that and bring all of your powers of observation to this question? So that whatever pain—physical pain, mental pain—arises in the course of the meditation, keep remembering that you’ve got lots of tools at hand. That way, you find that you can face any kind of suffering, any kind of pain at all, with a sense of confidence, remembering that that kind of suffering is optional. It’s the suffering that comes from your own ignorance. So that you don’t have to keep on being a victim over and over again.

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