Training Your Inner Critic

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The factors for awakening begin with mindfulness and discernment. In Thai, you often hear the two words put together, satipaña, meaning intelligence. And it’s good to think of intelligence as composed of these two factors. The first is mindfulness. The second one is actually called analysis. Analysis of qualities is the discernment factor in that series. Mindfulness is keeping something in mind, in this case the breath or the feelings, in and of themselves. Mind states mental qualities in and of themselves, whichever one you want to choose. And then analysis of qualities builds on the distinction between skillful and unskillful. The whole process of working toward awakening is one of developing skills. It’s not for pushing for a breakdown or pushing the mind to an extremity. It’s actually learning how to use your powers of judgment, learning how to use your inner critic in a skillful way. Because as we work on the meditation, the whole point is to develop our powers of discernment, our sensitivity to what’s going on. Because in one sense, awakening could be possible at any moment. The deathless is always there. So why don’t we sense it? Because our sensitivities haven’t been developed enough. It’s not that we have to break through some sort of iron barrier. It’s more that we don’t clearly see what’s happening, what’s going on. In very simple terms, we don’t see our mistakes. We do things that are unskillful and we don’t realize it. Sometimes we realize it, but we don’t admit it. Maybe that’s because our inner critic is toxic. It’s so critical that we try to turn it off. We feel debilitated by it. So we do what we can to snuff it out. But then when the inner critic gets snuffed out, then you have no control over the mind at all. No sense of what’s right, what’s wrong, what’s useful, what’s not useful. So we have to learn how to train our inner critic so it’s actually useful and something we want to have around all the time. That’s where the Buddha began meditation instructions when he was teaching Rahula by telling Rahula to look at his actions, look at his intentions before he did something. If it looked like it was going to harm anybody, don’t do it. If it looked harmless, go ahead and do it. While he was doing it, he was to watch for any immediate results that were coming from that action. And if he saw that any harm was being done, either to himself or others, he should stop. If he didn’t see any harm, he should keep on acting. Then when it was all done, he should look over the long-term results. If he noticed any harm, he should talk it over with someone who’s experienced on the path, and then to resolve not to repeat that mistake. If he didn’t see any harm, he should take joy in the fact that he was training and continue training to be even more skillful and more perceptive. That’s how you train a healthy inner critic. In other words, you admit your mistakes. And you learn from them. You’re willing to talk them over. And the purpose of the critic is not to shoot you down or to say what a horrible person you are. The emphasis is not on the person, it’s on the actions. Notice the Buddha’s telling Rahula, “Try to avoid a mistake if you can, but if you do make a mistake, this is how you handle it.” Making a mistake is not the end of the world. You develop regret, but not remorse. In other words, you regret the fact that you did make the mistake, but you don’t get all tied up in feelings of guilt, because you realize there’s always another chance. And this is all that can be asked of a human being. Our eyes may be in the front of our face, but our hindsight is a lot better than our foresight. So you take it in stride. This is part of being a human being. You’re going to make mistakes. The most important skill you can develop in life is how to recognize a mistake and how to learn from it so you don’t repeat it. This is the attitude that a craftsman would take toward developing any kind of mental skill, like carpentry, metalworking, or anything that requires doing things over and over again and getting more and more refined, getting more and more sensitive to what you’re doing and the results and the connection between the two. This is one of the reasons why mindfulness is so important in all this. So you can remember what you did. That’s actually how the Buddha defines mindfulness, the ability to remember things that were said and done long ago. Both the lessons you learned from other people and what you did and said long ago, so that when the results come up you can recognize, “Oh, this comes from that.” Because it’s only when you see the connection between cause and effect that you can correct or make corrections in the causes so the effects come out better. This principle applies all across the practice of meditation. The mind gets into concentration, and if it seems okay, you stick with it. Stay with it, stay with it, stay with it, until you begin to see that even in that nice state of concentration, there’s some stress. You’re trying to figure out what’s causing the stress. When you can see the connection, you can let it go. The mind will go into a deeper state of concentration. After a while, there are many levels and many types of concentration the mind can get into, and an important part of the practice is learning to distinguish what’s right concentration and what’s wrong. Even in the various levels of right concentration, what’s the difference among those levels? That’s how you begin to see the different elements of what’s going on in the mind. It’s only when you see those elements clearly that you begin to realize precisely where the cause of stress and suffering is. So it’s very refined work. It requires that your inner critic be well-trained, i.e., doesn’t take any holidays but at the same time is not debilitating. It’s right there with the purpose of developing further skill. Your inner critic is there. You’re there with compassion, working out of compassion, working out of honesty and integrity. When we stop and think about that, most critics in the world are not like that. They’re pretty irresponsible. I read a novel years back, and one of the characters in the beginning or early part of the novel was a restaurant critic. He was pretty good at shooting down what he thought were awkward attempts at running restaurants. Then, toward the end of the novel, he actually starts running a restaurant himself, and he begins to realize what it’s like to run a restaurant. He runs across a critical customer, and he feels like shaking the customer. He says, “Do you realize how lucky you are that there’s food on the table here right now?” This shows that his earlier attitude as a critic was totally unrealistic. He was in the kitchen, actually helping things, rather than just sitting out in the restaurant and wrinkling his nose. The inner critic is there to make things better, to make you more sensitive, to make you more skillful. Even though it may seem strange that when we’re here for the sake of a deathless happiness, we’re focusing on little tiny things like words and actions and thoughts and their consequences, but that’s the only place you’re going to develop the sensitivity to see the deeper things, if you’re willing to take the time and develop the patience. So that your inner critic becomes mature, someone you want to have around all the time.

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