The Observer

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Learning to evaluate the breath and to evaluate the mind is a very important skill in developing both concentration and discernment. For the mind to settle down, there has to be a sense of a snug fit between your awareness and the object of your awareness. And you also need the ability to fend off any distractions. That’s what evaluation does. In creating the snug fit, it looks at the state of your mind and poses the question, “What’s needed here? Is the mind ready to settle down with the breath, or does it have to think about other topics first to get it in the mood?” And if it’s not in the mood, well, what’s the problem? Is the mind too restless? Is it too sluggish? Are you feeling discouraged? Are you feeling bored? You have to take stock of these things. Then figure out what’s needed. This is why we have all those auxiliary meditation topics, to think your way back to the breath so the mind is willing and ready to focus on the breath. Then you look at the breath. What kind of breath does the body need right now? Because you want to create a sense of well-being in the body. The body feels tight, tense, exhausted. It’s not going to be a pleasant place to stay, and the mind is going to want to wander off. It’s like a child in a house where it feels uncomfortable. It just walks out and wanders around the neighborhood. So you’re trying to create a snug fit between your awareness and the breath. You play with the breath energy. By the way, you decide you don’t want to play with the breath energy tonight, you just want to sit there and do nothing but watch what’s already there. That’s your choice. But it’s the evaluation that tells you why it’s a good choice, and you give it a try. As for fending off distractions, evaluation reminds you that if you’re wandering off after sensual desire, where is it going to take you? The desire itself is disturbing, and it puts you in conflict with a lot of other people who probably want the same thing you want. It leads the mind to do all kinds of stupid things. Evaluation reminds you of that fact. The same with ill will, sloth and torpor. Restlessness, anxiety, uncertainty. It helps to remind you of the drawbacks of these mind states, because the mind is so willing to fall in with them, usually. When you’re really angry at somebody, you can think up all sorts of good reasons for being angry at that person. But regardless of how true those reasons are, that’s not what you want right now. You don’t want to be spending your time worked up about this person’s actions or that person’s actions. You’re here to train the mind. So evaluation reminds you of this, brings you back. It helps you think in ways that can pull you out of that mind state. And in doing so, you develop not only concentration but also discernment. You settle down from understanding. In terms of the iddhipada, this is the last one, vimamsa, which is basically your powers of analysis, figuring things out. But evaluation is not only active, there’s a passive side to it as well. In order to figure things out, you have to watch them. And you find your mind leaning in one direction or the other. You’re asking this question, asking that question, trying to figure things out. In other times where it’s more passive, just watch, watch, watch. This is where the observer comes in. This is how you develop your observer. Because if your original analysis is based on preconceived notions, then the solution you’re going to propose may not fit the problem at all. So you have to watch. If the mind doesn’t settle down with the breath, is it a problem in the mind or is it a problem in the breath? And you may try changing the breath a little bit here and there. And if that doesn’t work, you will try looking in the mind. And if that doesn’t work, then you say, “Well, there’s something I haven’t learned yet, something I don’t understand yet.” So you have to watch. And whatever comes up, you’re just going to note it, note it, note it. There’s basically alertness, with a couple of other factors as well. There’s equanimity. You’re not going to react, you’re just going to watch. There’s patience. You’re willing to put up with whatever and take however much time is required. And there’s persistence, trying to maintain the mind in this mode of observing. There are four qualities right there. There are probably some other ones as well, but those are the big ones. This is a construct, it is a fabrication, but it’s a useful one because it puts the mind in a position where it can actually take in new information and notice things it might not have noticed before because it was too busy moving around. So when you encounter problems in your meditation, remember, there are these two ways of approaching them. One is the more active, the other is the more passive, and they both come under evaluation. And this observer that you’re developing, the more passive side, that’s an important skill that applies to a lot of issues in the meditation. When you’re dealing with pain, it’s good to have a very strong sense of the observer react to the pain. Again, this is where the patience comes in, and the equanimity. But they’re not patience and equanimity for their own sake. They’re for the sake of eventually seeing things you may not have noticed before. And at the same time, they help you cut any connections you may have felt with the pain. Because when you’re really observing, you’re observing not only the pain but also what the mind is doing around the pain. And you begin to notice the perceptions you apply to it. They’ll come and they’ll go, and the other perceptions will come and go. And some of them will make the pain flare up and others will calm it down. You want to notice that. You notice how the perception creates a bridge between your awareness and the pain. What happens when you drop the perception? Now, to be fair, you have to learn how to use this sense of the observer not only with pain but also with pleasure. And this is our problem. We’re open to gobbling down feelings because we’re open to gobble down pleasures. And whoops, here comes the pain. You’re going to have to end up gobbling down both sides. So when you’re learning how to separate your awareness out from the pain, you have to learn how to look at pleasure the same way. Learn how to observe it. Here comes the pleasure. This is one of the reasons why the instructions for concentration are “When pleasure comes, you note that it’s there, but you don’t go wallowing in it.” In other words, you don’t try gobbling it down. You stay with the breath. The pleasure is at one spot in your attention. You’re with the breath. They may be together in the same spot, but your radio is tuned into the breath station, ferreting out which sensations in here are breath sensations and allowing the pleasure to be there, letting it spread, letting it do its thing. If the pleasure is going to be good for the body, it’s going to be good for the body without your amplifying how good it is. You’re making a big deal out of it. So those are two areas where the sense of the observer is very important to develop. Another area is simply as you go through life. You’ve got your spot in the body where you focus your attention, trying to stay sensitive to the breath. Maybe in the middle of the chest, in front of the stomach, base of the throat, wherever your sensitive spot is, and trying to keep it open and relaxed. If you don’t have any real responsibilities at a particular time, just try to be observant. Watch, watch, watch what’s happening, both inside the body, inside the mind, and then also outside as well. This helps you see the movements of the mind very clearly. The mind moves, but your observer doesn’t move with it. That’s an important skill to develop, too. As your concentration gets deeper and more refined, your sense of the observer gets sharper. This is especially true when you start going into the formless states, when you know the mind is one thing and the breath is something else, or your awareness is one thing and the breath is something else. The distinction between the two of them doesn’t really become clear until you drop the breath. The breath gets still. There’s just the awareness, first of space, and then awareness of awareness itself. That’s where your sense of observer gets really sharply defined. When it gets really clear like that, then you can carry it through the day, even though you’re not really still in the formless state. But that perception is there in the background. It’s just the knowing, knowing, knowing. Whatever happens arises and passes away, but the knowing isn’t affected by that. You get to see a lot of things this way. There’s that famous passage where Ajahn Mahava was talking about Ajahn Mun’s passing away and his sense of feeling lost. At first he stopped and reminded himself, “Well, what was it? Whenever I had problems, what would Ajahn Mun always say?” And it was that if something comes up in your meditation and you’re not sure about it, afraid it could lead you astray, just go back to that sense of the observer and just watch. And whatever it is will pass, and you’ll be safe. That’s your safe harbor. As things come up, the mind is tempted to interpret it this way or interpret it that way. But simply having that observer to fall back on helps protect you from going along with whatever the interpretations are. Ultimately, you will want to turn your observer on the observer itself. That’s when you begin to notice that this is not one solitary, single thing. It is a faction in your inner committee. The alertness, the persistence, the equanimity, the patience, and all the other fabricating that goes around having this sense of the observer. You begin to be able to take these things apart. But as with so many of the skills we develop in the meditation, don’t be in too great a hurry to take it apart. It’s got its uses. When a very strong defilement comes up that you usually give in to, try to hold on to that sense of the observer. Watching the defilement come, watching the events that happen in the body, the way the defilement tries to hijack your breath, hijack your heart rate, hijack all your physical processes to make you feel that you just cannot live without giving in to it. When you go to the observer, watch. Have that sense that these symptoms are there on the body, but they’ll go. All you have to do is be in your observation bubble and they’ll pass. The same when pain comes, the kind of pain that normally you can’t stand. There’s a strong sense that the observer is one thing and the pain is something else. It’s a lot easier to deal with. And it really does help you see a lot of the movements of the mind. So this more passive side of evaluation, the observer, is a really important one to develop. It’s what helps to ensure that your analysis of things, your experience, doesn’t just start spinning off into abstractions. Then you learn how to read what’s going on in your mind, read what’s going on in your body, as accurately as possible. So take good care of your observer, because it can help you in all kinds of ways. (crickets chirping)

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