Evaluating Your Practice

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One of the skills you have to develop as a meditator is learning how to evaluate how you’re doing. Part of it depends on what you’re trying to do. As the Buddha said, if you’re trying to bring the mind to stillness, tranquility, the questions you ask are, “How do I make it more still? How do I make it more settled? How do I learn how to indulge in the pleasure of the concentration? In other words, why you’re trying to get the mind to settle down. You’re learning how not to pay attention to the things that would distract you. Sometimes we get too doubtful about ourselves.”How can my mind be still when there’s this thought or this is happening?” If you start thinking about that while you’re trying to get the mind still, it’s never going to get still. You have to say, “I’m just going to do what I can to keep it still.” And still, and still, and still. As for whatever else may be coming up along the fringes, don’t pay it any attention. And if you fall off the concentration hump, just get right back. What thinking is involved in is how you can make the mind more snug with its object. In other words, this is not the time to step back and be critical of your concentration. You’re trying to make it better and better and better. And so you have to have that oomph that goes with, “I can do this. And if I didn’t do it right just now, I can do it right this next moment and this next moment. Keep at it. Keep at it that way.” There’s a certain determination that goes into concentration, especially in getting the mind to be still. If you’re focusing on the tranquility side of concentration, you have to have some confidence. You have to have the determination to stick with your determination. These things feed on each other. So this is not the time to step back and be critical of, “Well, where’s the stress here?” aside from what’s getting in the way of the mind settling down even further. In other words, you have to know the distinction between evaluation and doubt or uncertainty. Do you know the breath is coming in? Yes. Do you know it’s coming out? Yes. That’s what you need to know. Just stick with it. Now, when you’re trying to develop insight or discernment, it’s another matter. You have to be able to step back and ask yourself, “Where is the stress here? And what am I doing that’s contributing to it?” Sometimes you’re going to ask yourself that question as you’re in the concentration. If you find that by asking that question you’re destroying the concentration, just drop it for the time being and go back to trying to be as focused as you can. Whether it’s a small focus or a large focus depends on your needs at the moment. But if you find that asking yourself that question actually helps you see, “Oh, there’s this disturbance here, and there’s this disturbance there,” not so much in what’s distracting me from the concentration, but in the concentration itself. That way you use the teaching on inconstancy to realize, “Okay, what am I doing here that I’m doing not so skillfully but I need to do more skillfully?” “What activities am I bringing to the concentration that are unnecessary?” After all, as the Buddha said, when you’re starting out, you have to evaluate things to settle in. You have to keep reminding yourself to stay here. But after a while, it becomes more and more still and more and more settled. You don’t need to do so much evaluation anymore. You can drop it for the time being. In other words, that’s one activity you’re bringing in. Or your perception of the breath. Your perception of what you’re focusing on may be crude, and you realize, “If I hold another perception in mind, it’s going to be easier to stay there, and the concentration gets more refined, less disturbed by ups and downs.” That’s how you develop the insight side. And those are the basic questions. How do you view fabrications? How do you still fabrications? How do you regard them so you can be free from them? You’ve got to see them as stressful, see them as something you don’t want to get involved in. You don’t even have to think the term “fabrication.” Just think, “Okay, there’s an activity going on here, there’s an intention going on here that I may be missing.” And if you see it, and you see the level of stress that comes when it’s there, and the levels when it’s gone, that’s the activity of discernment that frees you from these things. So the questions vary depending on what you’re trying to do, what you feel is necessary in your practice. There are times when the mind is too frazzled to even want to think about anything. But you find one little corner someplace in your awareness, someplace in the body, and just settle down there and be snug. And don’t do much thinking. Don’t do much evaluating. Just enough to keep you there until the mind has been rested. And then you can start thinking about expanding the range of your awareness, working with the breath energies in the body, until your frame of reference becomes larger. The larger frame of reference is necessary for the type of concentration that you try to maintain as you go through the day. If your concentration is totally one-pointed, then as soon as the one point moves, you’ve destroyed the concentration. But if it has a larger frame of reference, then you can think of the day going through you but not getting stuck anywhere. Then you can be aware of things, but you have the sense of being within the framework of your body, within the framework of the breath energy in the body. That kind of concentration is really resilient. So you look at what you need and you ask the questions that are appropriate for what you’re trying to do. As for your attainments, you always want to put a question mark next to them. Is this jhana? Well, I don’t know. It might be something good, so put a little post-it note on it. You’re trying to get to know the territory, and being able to claim that you’ve reached that level is really worthless. We’re here not to be able to make claims about things; we’re here to see where we’re causing ourselves stress, where we’re causing ourselves unnecessary suffering. So the question always is, if you try to figure out what you’ve got, and say you’ve been in a good, strong state of concentration, you come out, you try to remember its distinctive features. What did you do to get there? What did you do to stay there? Those are the questions you want to ask. Ask for an insight that comes. The question is, can I use it right now? And if it’s nothing to use right now, then you just drop it. It’ll come back when you need it. Insights like this are like the golden eggs at the goose ladder. You use them right away. If you try to hold onto them, they turn into coal feathers. Make sure you don’t kill the goose. In other words, it’s your stillness of mind that’s creating those golden eggs. That’s what you want to maintain. At the same time, the other quality is your honesty. When you ask yourself, “Is there stress here?” you want to be able to say, “Yes, but I’m looking for it,” rather than trying to assume, “Well, if I saw any stress right now, that might mean my attainment isn’t as high as I thought, so I’m going to pretend it’s not there.” That destroys you as a meditator. You want to always be willing to say, “Okay, maybe there’s something here I haven’t seen yet,” and look for it. So the question is not what I’ve attained, but the question is, “Am I really honest with myself? How honest can I be?” That’s why the Buddha put that first in his instructions to Rahula. The importance of being truthful, i.e., both truthful to others and truthful to yourself, because those go together. Again, you have to be careful. When you’re working on your concentration, while you’re in the concentration, honesty doesn’t mean saying, “Oh, this is not working at all. I’m horrible, miserable.” Too many people think that honesty means getting down on yourself. What it means is learning how to look at what you’ve got. Learn with fairness and in line with what you’re trying to do. If you’re trying to get the mind to be still, just put your doubts aside and say, “Is this good? Well, let’s say it’s good enough for the time being, as long as it’s still and I’ve got something to work with.” That’s what the discernment in terms of your defilements is. That’s when you really do have to be hard on yourself. It’s so easy to justify one kind of defilement or another. “There’s nothing wrong with this. I’ve seen other people indulge in this kind of thing. Why can’t I?” Other people’s business is other people’s business. Your business is your business. Can you be honest with yourself? Just recently I was reading some postings on a website where people were objecting to the idea that sex involved craving. They tried to argue that, no, there didn’t have to be craving in sex, because, after all, craving means dissatisfaction, and this person was claiming that sex was pretty satisfying. I’m glad to hear there are laughs in the back of the room. That’s just total self-delusion. So the question is not, “What have I attained?” The question is, “Can I keep on being honest?” And that’s how the great Ajahns were able to evaluate their attainments. In other words, your honesty is more important than the attainment. If you can maintain that attitude, then you know your practice is going well.

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