Learning to Critique Your Inner Movies

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We meditate primarily to gain insight into the mind, to see where we’re causing unnecessary suffering and learn how to put an end to it. Discernment is what’s going to be able to do that. But the discernment needs help. We also have to mind is still, in a state of concentration, to give it the strength it’s going to need, to give it a good solid foundation from which it can do its work. It’s like a scientific experiment. If you have very careful measuring equipment but you put it on a wobbly table, then you can’t really trust the results that come out of the equipment. Our equipment isn’t even all that reliable or very precise. It’s going to take some while to give it some precision. But the first thing we need to do is give it a good solid table. So you’re trying to be with the breath as consistently as you can and learn how to come back to the breath no matter what, whatever kind of thought pulls you away, whether it’s fascinating or not. It seems to be important or not. For the time being, you don’t want to have anything to do with any thoughts, aside from those that bring you to the breath and help you adjust to the breath and make it a good place to stay. This means you’re going to have to leave a lot of thoughts dangling. There’s part of the mind that likes to finish off a thought, tie up the loose ends, and then put it aside. Sometimes a thought can be very involving, and by the time you’ve tied up the loose ends, you find that you’re tied up as well. So for the time being, just drop things. It’s like learning how to analyze a movie. You don’t want to get too involved in the story. If you get fully involved in the story and start identifying with the characters, then you can’t really analyze it properly. To analyze it, you need to know how to watch for the editing, watch for how the music is brought in, look at the different camera angles, all the different technical details of the movie. But if you’re involved in the story, you can’t notice those technical details. So you fall for it. Each state of becoming in the mind is like a movie. And you want to understand the processes of becoming. But all too often, as you start analyzing things, you get sucked into that world of becoming. And you miss all the various techniques that mind has for creating these worlds out of nothing, or out of very little. So think of concentration as being like taking the movie projector and turning up the light in the projector so it’s so bright that it wipes out everything in the movie. If you’re fully with the breath, really intent on the breath, think of the breath filling the whole body and your awareness filling the whole body, and everything is there all at once, from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet, with no one spot being more prominent than it. Then another. It’s a full whiteout. That way, whatever thoughts that might be coming up in the mind just get blotted out by the light. It doesn’t necessarily have to be a light with the meditation, but just think of the intensity of your focus, the intensity of your full attention in the present moment. That can white out the thoughts. So if you find yourself trying to understand some greed, or understand some lust, or some aversion, or rid of the emotion, and you find yourself getting sucked in, go back to the breath and think of whiting everything out. You’re not ready for that particular movie yet. But you will learn as you get the mind into concentration and have to deal with distracting thoughts. In the very beginning, you just have to give a karate chop, just enough to get the mind to get past them so they’re a little bit out of the way. You can’t dig them out by the roots, but you just push them out of the way. I’ll come back to that later. And in the course of pushing them out of the way, you begin to gain little glimpses of exactly what’s going on as the mind forms a thought. You learn how to look for the warning signs that the mind is about to leave the breath and go off to something else. You don’t have to wait until you’re already in the midst of the thought to realize, “Oh my gosh, I’m off in this other thought and I shouldn’t be meditating.” That’s too late. I mean, it’s not too late to pull yourself out. But you’ve missed a lot of the steps. You want to be alert to the fact that thoughts will come creeping into the mind again and they’ll have their ways of signaling themselves. And you want to be able to watch for those signals. Notice when the mind is beginning to get a little bit loose with the breath. It’s not quite as fully intent. The intensity of the lamp and the projector is beginning to fade a little bit. Watch out. The mind is ready to go. There are various ways of dealing with it. One is just to add some more intensity to your focus. And again, it’s not just a one-pointed focus, it’s a full-body focus. Or get more interested in some of the subtleties of the breath. It’s when the mind is bored with the breath that it starts looking for other things. So you can use either the power of concentration or your interest in the breath. And the more you can cultivate that interest, the better things are going to go in the meditation. But as you deal with these distractions, you’ll gain some ideas about how the mind creates a thought world and how you go slipping into it. That’s what’s called the processes of becoming and birth. They’re right here. It’s in the same way that when a person dies, when he leaves the body, images will appear in the mind. You’re beginning to realize you can’t stay in this body at all. You move on. Whatever the image is, you move right into it. That’s the opening to another world, another birth. It’s the same process. Sometimes, right now, you’re able to stay. You don’t have to bet everything on whatever little bubble of thought comes up arising in the mind. And so you’re in a better position to see how they come, how they can be disbanded. You can start doing your analysis of the movie. What kind of director is your mind? What kind of actress play roles in this? What kind of cinematographer? How’s the editing? What’s the background commentary? You’re going to be able to take these things apart to see. There’s a technique to the way the mind puts things together to create these worlds, and you’re going to be able to see through it. When your discernment is sharp enough, you don’t have to blot the movies out anymore. You can watch them and see where their usual hooks are and find yourself. You’ll find yourself not getting hooked, like you’ve got a lot of Velcro in your mind and you’re learning how to shave all the little hooks off the Velcro. So this is a gradual process, and you need to have your defense, your ways to pull out. As I was saying earlier today, when I was learning Thai boxing, back when I was a layperson, the very first thing they taught was how to pull out. Pull away from your opponent without exposing yourself. And it’s the same with meditation. Sometimes we find ourselves face-to-face with huge defilements in the mind. We realize we’re not ready for them yet, but learn how to pull out. Help use the power of concentration, even just in terms of the power of the concentration or the more refined method, which is to get interested in the mechanics of breathing and the way the mind relates to its breath. The breath in the body, through its perceptions, through its fabrications. Learn how to take those things apart. Either way helps pull you out of the thought world. You make a mental note, you’ll be ready for it when you come back. But in the meantime, you’ve learned how to put it off to the side, or put yourself off to the side, so you can gather your forces. Sharpen your tools so that someday you’ll be ready to take these things on.

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