Inner Authorities

January 18, 2025

People often speak of the inner critic as if there were only one. Actually, there are many. We’ve picked up voices from who knows where. And they all have different values. Which is one of the things that drives you crazy about inner criticism. You try to obey one critic, and another critic comes in from another angle and says, “No, you’re wrong.” You feel like you can’t win. A large part of the practice is learning how to pare down those critics on one you can rely on. And learn how to give prominence to that one, make that one authoritative. Because you’ve encountered so many authorities in our lives. Our parents, teachers, voices in the media. We gather them up, and they rattle around in our heads. And we learn to think of them as being part of us, that we believe these things. I know in my own case, when I was over in Thailand, my first year, I spent a lot of time alone on a mountain. And John Fung was at the foot of the mountain. It was good to have somebody who I could learn to trust, to help sort out all the different voices in my head. I found one of the best approaches was to try to identify, where did that idea come from? Where did this idea come from? Whose voice is this? Whose voice is that? You can ask two questions. One is, when you can identify a voice, the question is, does that person have your best interest in mind? And especially with the media, you never really know. Why do they want you to believe this? Why do they want you to believe that? That’s a good question to ask every time you read the media, or listen to the media. Who wants you to believe that? Why? Learn to question the authority. The next question is, what do these people know? Even people who mean you well may be pretty ignorant. How many voices in your mind? Take into consideration the fact that maybe the big event in the human race, in human history, is the Buddha’s awakening. This is one of the reasons why conviction in that awakening is such an important part of the practice. I was having a conversation one time with someone whose background was in Christianity and Zen. He said, “Really, Theravada, what do you have faith in?” I said, “It has to be something specific, not something general like the Dhamma.” He said, “Oh, I have faith in the Buddha’s awakening. He really was awakened through his own efforts. He was able to explain how he gained that awakening in a way that other people can gain awakening too.” Think about that. That’s a big event. The awakening involved total cessation of suffering. It came from training the mind. Think about the Buddha himself, how many voices he had to sort through. People told him that the path that he was following was an impossible one, and he found the teachers were most authoritative in that time, and found that their teachings were lacking. He had to pull himself out of that. And how did he finally know who was right and who was wrong? Well, he found a path that led to something that was deathless. A knowledge that didn’t involve the aggregates at all. We sometimes think that if you listen to the Buddha’s teachings, you finally get to a point where they make sense. It really hits home. That what he says is true. That somehow is awakening. That’s not awakening. That’s just conviction. The real proof is when you find the deathless inside. Think about that image of the elephant hunter looking for a big bull elephant. He goes into the forest and he sees some big tracks. And because he’s an experienced elephant hunter, he doesn’t immediately jump to the conclusion that this is the big elephant he wants. After all, there are dwarf females with big feet. Could be theirs. But they look likely. So he follows them along. He sees scratch marks up in the trees. And again, he doesn’t come to the conclusion that this must be a big bull elephant, because there are tall females with tusks. Scratch marks could be theirs. Finally he comes to the big bull elephant itself. He sees him directly. Either in a clearing or under a tree. That’s when he knows, again, this is the big bull elephant I want. In the same way, you follow the path. Get the mind in a good concentration. Those are footprints. You gain psychic powers. Those are scratch marks. The word in that particular suit is when you arrive at completion. In other words, you’ve seen the deathless. It’s a knowledge that has nothing to do with form, feelings, perceptions, thought constructs, or sensory consciousness. That’s when you know you’ve found something really genuine. Up until that point, you’re going on conviction. But think about it. Isn’t that a good measuring stick for how to sort through the voices in your mind? Which ones know about the possibility of the deathless? Which ones know about how you can train yourself to do all the things that are required by the path? The voices that are aware of that, take that into consideration. Those are the ones you want to have take authority in your mind. As for the other ones, you can question them from their perspective. What happiness do they propose? What duties do they propose? The media like to tell us that we have to be responsible citizens and pay attention to what the media have to say. Basically telling us that we have to be indoctrinated and it’s our duty to be indoctrinated. Why do we let them have sway over our minds? Because what they’re telling us is the important things in the world are things that other people are doing someplace else. Whereas the Buddha’s message is the important things in the world are what you’re doing right now. That’s the message that gives you power. The message of the media makes you powerless, makes you feel inadequate. Why are you duty-bound to have that indoctrination? You’re going to adopt views that you’re going to take as working hypotheses. Try the four Noble Truths and the duties they give you. Instead of being duty-bound to keep in touch with the news, you’re duty-bound to comprehend your suffering, to see that suffering is in the clinging, to abandon the cause, to realize cessation over which to develop dispassion for the causes of suffering. And then you do that by developing the path. Those are duties with your best interests in mind. They’re duties that tell you that you have the power in your hands. To make a difference in your life. A really big difference. Those are the voices you want to listen to. Those are the ones who should have authority inside. So sort through your voices. When an idea comes to your mind, where did it come from? The Buddha calls this “guarding the truth.” Where did you get the idea? And why would you still believe it? The basis of reason? The basis of obligation? The mind has so many ways of making itself obligated to do unskillful things. I’m going to let us see through those false obligations. Remember the duties that the Buddha gives you are not imposed on you. He doesn’t say you have to follow him. But if you do follow these duties, they’ll lead to the ultimate happiness. What pushes you, of course, is the fact that you are suffering. When you recognize that, something’s going to be done. There’s that missed quote from the Buddha, saying that he said that he teaches one thing and one thing only, suffering and the end of suffering. Many people pointed out, well, that’s two things. Unless you decide that accepting suffering is the end of suffering. But the Buddha never said one thing and one thing only. What he said was, all I teach is suffering and the end of suffering. Two things. So we have a choice. Which do you want? Do you want to keep on suffering, or do you want to put an end? The duties that come from the media, the duties that come from other voices inside. They’re on the side of continuing suffering. The voices that take the Buddha’s awakening into consideration are those on the side of not suffering. So learn how to make that clear distinction and use that as your sorting principle inside, as to which voices should have authority and which voices are just floating by. It’s in this way you can straighten out that committee inside. Because after all, we do have to have that inner critic. So you want to make it one, who’s on the side of the Dhamma. The Buddha said the self should be its own prosecutor. This is what he meant. You need to be your own inner critic. Without that inner critic, observing you, telling you when you’ve done something wrong, for your own good, you’re lost. Make sure you have the voices of the noble ones inside. Because when they criticize you, they’re criticizing you out of compassion. We should be grateful for their comments. Those are the people who should have authority inside. You have to learn how to trust them. They really do mean you well, and they really do know what they’re talking about. You know that, of course, until you find the direct experience of the bull elephant. But this is a good working hypothesis to follow. Because where do other hypotheses take you? Do they know where they’re taking you? As Buddha said, there are many different paths in life. A lot of people don’t know what path they’re on. Some of them go to some pretty bad places. They don’t mean that look bad themselves. But they take you down. Other paths take you up. The path that the Buddha lays out has had a lot of people to certify that, yes, he’s true. So take them as your authorities. Always be glad you did.

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