Self Evaluation

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One of the trickiest but most important parts of the practice is self-evaluation, checking up on how you’re doing. This applies to everything that we do as part of the practice, not just the meditation. Too often it’s tied up with attitudes about ourselves that we bring to the practice. Some people tend to be too hard on themselves, beat themselves down. This is why some of them come to Buddhism, because they feel, “If I only didn’t have a self, I wouldn’t be suffering so much.” So they’re trying to erase their self. But then your self is what’s doing the practice. You can’t erase it. When you run up against that fact, you tend to be too hard on yourself. Each little, tiny problem becomes a major disaster. I know a psychotherapist who was working with some kids who were in a school for kids who had broken the law, and she found that they tended to treat everything going wrong in their lives as a ten. Your brother’s been shot—it’s a ten. You’re going on a date and you can’t find the right dress—it’s a ten. Every little thing becomes a ten. That shows a lack of perspective and a lack of confidence in yourself. The other extreme, of course, is the overconfident self. When something unusual and unexpected happens in the meditation, all of a sudden you’re a stream-enter, or you’ve attained jhana, or whatever. That’s dangerous in the sense that it can close off any further progress in the path. Both extremes are things to be avoided. The question is how to find the middle point. There are so many things in the middle point. It’s not halfway between overconfidence and underconfidence. It’s learning how to look at things in the right way. Look at your actions. Look at the skill as a work in progress. Think of whatever physical skills you’ve developed, manual skills, and how you’ve learned how to deal with mistakes that happen in the course of that. When you’re playing a musical instrument and you make a mistake, how do you correct for that? If you’re giving a performance, you just leave it and you can move on. If you’re a carpenter and you make a mistake, you go back and you say, “What can I do to fix this? Where did it go wrong? How can I fix this?” rather than viewing it as a disaster. What you’re doing is developing a different sense of yourself through focusing not so much on yourself but focusing on the actions you’re doing and the results you’re getting. When things go wrong, you say, “Okay, what did I do wrong this time that I can correct for the next time?” And there are times when you make mistakes that are totally beyond your control. You have to learn how to read for that. Other times you realize you put the yogurt in the wrong place in the refrigerator, or somebody put the yogurt in the wrong place in the refrigerator. So you come up with a new policy for where to put the yogurt in the refrigerator so it doesn’t fall on the floor when you open the door. And learn how to take these things in stride. That’s the new kind of self you’re trying to develop here, one that can take things in stride but is also eager to learn and actually wants to be able to recognize a mistake when it sees it. This is the problem with the overconfident self. It doesn’t want to recognize mistakes. It doesn’t acknowledge that they were made. It creates all kinds of narratives to say, “Well, that wasn’t a mistake after all.” And we can see the damage of this all around. But as a meditator, you want to be able to recognize a mistake and learn how to take it in stride. Learn from it. Remember the Buddhist instructions to Rahula on how to learn from mistakes. Make up your mind you’re going to do as well as possible, but then you look very carefully at the results of your actions while you’re doing them and after they’re done. If you see that you’re causing harm that you didn’t expect while you’re doing the action, you stop. If you realize the harm only afterwards, you go and talk it over with somebody. Don’t be too embarrassed. Learn from that other person and then make up your mind you’re not going to repeat that mistake. The Buddha also had an instruction one time to this lay person who was a former student of the Jains. He said, “Anybody who kills, steals, has illicit sex, breaks the five precepts, is going to go to hell.” Of course, we all think about it. We’ve all broken the precepts at one point or another. He said, “You think about that, and it’s as if you’re already there in hell.” That’s what the Buddha said. But that’s not how the Buddha teaches. You realize that you made the mistakes. You recognize, “Okay, that was a mistake. It wasn’t good. What’s the best that can be asked of a human being? Well, I’m not going to repeat it.” And then you spread lots of goodwill, both to yourself and to others. Goodwill for others is to remind you of why you don’t want to make the mistake. You don’t want to harm them. Goodwill for yourself is the same sort of thing. You don’t want to harm yourself at the same time. If you get too much down in yourself for a mistake, then you’re going to forget about it. And in forgetting about it, you haven’t learned a lesson. You want to be able to keep that mistake in mind, but not be wounded by it, not be hurt by it. Just realize that this is part of how we grow in the practice. So that just right attitude and self-evaluation means focusing on actions, focusing on this as a skill, focusing on your actions as a work in progress, and also learning a sense of time and place, when to turn on your critic and when to turn the critic off. Because there are times when, as you’re meditating, it’s too early to tell how things are going. You stick with the breath for a while, and sometimes it takes a long time for things to settle down, but they will settle down. In that case, if you’re too jumpy and too critical right from the beginning, it gets in the way. Other times, when something is obviously wrong, you say, “Oh, I’ve got to change.” There’s a parallel here with writing. In the first stage of writing, you pretty much put whatever is in your mind on the paper. It doesn’t have to be in any order. In fact, you can scribble all over a piece of paper. Only then, when you’ve got everything down on the paper, then you begin to look for connections, and then you start writing. And you save the critic for the next read-through. Then the same with meditation. Give yourself some time with your topic. If you’ve come up with a new technique for dealing with a problem, give it time. Be patient. Say, “Well, let’s see how this pans out in the long term.” And don’t be placing bets on whether this is going to be a mistake or whether it’s going to be right. Sometimes if you want a technique to be right, you can then tell yourself, “Well, that got me good results,” even though it didn’t. Or if you’re anticipating that whatever you do is going to be a failure, that’s going to spell failure right there. So again, there’s a skill in learning when to be critical and when not, and where to focus your criticism. It’s on the actions, it’s not on you. Because if you get too down on yourself on the various solutions you try to give to problems, after a while the mind stops giving solutions. Or if you’re too quick to say that something worked, then it’s not going to think of any new solutions, genuine solutions at all. So have an experimental attitude. Practice is an experiment. Remember, the Buddha himself was experimenting. And you try to set up the conditions of the experiment as best you can, and then you look. This is where William James’ distinction between trues of the observer and trues of the will comes in. You will the experiment to be as well-designed as possible, but then you just have to observe. Is it working? Let your desire for it to work or not work get in the way of evaluating what’s actually working and what’s not. And how do you know how to judge things? Well, it’s a process that develops over time. Bit by bit by bit, you get more subtle and more observant. Your standards of judgment get more precise as you try your best to look and observe. There’s no other solution to it. Just try your best. The purpose of these instructions is to give you some ideas of where to focus your effort and how to talk to yourself in the meantime. So little problems don’t become major disasters, and major disasters don’t become nothing that you notice at all. I’ve mentioned in the past that medical school where they taught brain surgery, and they were having problems with trying to figure out which students to admit which ones not. Because everybody who applies for the brain surgery program is going to have straight A’s all the way through. But just because someone has straight A’s in classes doesn’t mean they’re going to be good surgeons. So they had to figure out which questions to ask during the interviews, to figure out what kind of quality of character they had in the different applicants. And they found that two questions were very useful. One was, “Can you tell me about a mistake you made recently?” And watching how the person responded to that told them a lot. The overconfident ones who said, “Well, I never make mistakes,” or the ones who were afraid to admit that they made mistakes, they were not accepted. It was the ones who would admit to mistakes in a mature way. Those were the ones who were accepted. The other question was, “Can you tell us how you would avoid that mistake in the future?” If the person hadn’t thought about how to avoid the mistake, that was another sign that something was wrong. The candidates, however, said, “Well, I’d try it this way or that way.” Those were the ones who were accepted. In other words, you admit your mistakes and then you try to figure out how not to repeat them. And you have the maturity to know, “Okay, we as human beings make mistakes. Like Kierkegaard said, we live forward but understand backward. So when we’re moving forward, we’re bound to find some things we don’t understand. But you do learn from your mistakes. That’s what mindfulness is for, to remember when you did things right, when you did things wrong, and apply that knowledge as you move forward. In the experiment, that is, you learn practice.

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