Appropriate Attention

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The Buddha taught that the most helpful internal quality for cutting through the things that tie the mind down is what’s called appropriate attention. The Pali term is yoni soma nasi gana. You learn how to cut through the things that tie the mind down. You learn how to look at your experience in an appropriate way and ask the right questions about it. When he gives examples of inappropriate attention, it’s questions about “Who am I? What am I? What was I in the past? What will I be in the future?” All those questions of self-identity that everybody tells us are so important. The Buddha says, “Hey, don’t ask them. They’re not worth it. They don’t lead anywhere.” The questions we do ask are the ones that are appropriate. They’re the ones related to vulnerable truths. Where is stress right now? Where is the suffering right now? What’s its cause? How does it end? What can you do to bring it to an end? Those are the questions that are worth asking. You can ask these questions in ways that are helpful all along the path. The first ones are simple. The Buddha said the first questions you should ask a teacher when you go see the teacher are, “What’s skillful? What’s unskillful? What, if I do it, will lead to long-term happiness? What will I do that will lead to long-term suffering?” There are a couple of assumptions in here, but they’re important ones. One is that your actions do make a difference, and it’s possible to develop skill in your actions. How do you do that? You just observe what you’re doing and then look at the results. If the results don’t come out the way you’d want them to, go back and look at what you did and make changes. We start with our outside actions and learn how to be skillful on the external level. Then we turn around and apply the same principle internally. In other words, you have to be sensitive to what you’re doing. So many of us are not. We just kind of barge through life doing this, doing that, and say, “Gee, I wonder why that person is that way. I wonder why this situation is this way,” without looking at what we did to make that person react in that way, make the situation come out in this particular way. We act as if it was just simply a given that was there. We’re remarkably insensitive to what we do that creates the situations we experience. In particular, it creates the problems we experience. So the Buddha says, “Turn around. Look at your actions. Look at what you do. Look at what you’re saying.” This is one of the reasons why he has us work with the precepts as a basis for the practice. Just get sensitive to what you’re doing. Put some bounds on your actions. Have principles in what you do, and then see what happens as a result. You’ll find that life begins to clean up. You’re creating fewer and fewer issues for yourself, fewer and fewer problems for yourself. Then you turn around and use the same principle as you meditate. The sensitivity that you’ve developed in the course of observing the precepts then gets put to use in an even more refined area. What are you doing with your mind right now? What intentions do you have? For the time being, we’re focused on the breath. What else is the mind doing now? Oftentimes, the mind is like a committee. There are lots of little voices and lots of little agendas in there. As you’re working on concentration, you’ve got to learn to sort those other voices out. Be sensitive to them and learn how to keep them quiet, not get pulled away by them. Again, the question is, how do you do this most skillfully? There are basic principles that you can learn from other people, but a lot of it comes from just your own dealings with your own inner voices. Learning how to recognize a distraction when it comes and just not get involved. Learning how to notice when the mind seems to be ready to move off. In other words, it begins to get bored with the breath and starts searching around for something else. Even though it’s still with the breath, it’s beginning to move a little bit. When you can sense that, you can cut off those distractions even before they happen. This way you find you get more and more skillful at staying with the breath in the present moment. Then you try to make yourself comfortable with the breath. Actually, the two processes go together. If the breath isn’t comfortable, it’s hard to stay with it. So during the times when you are with the breath, try to make it as comfortable as you can. This little exercise that Ajahn Lee sets out for you is to learn how to breathe comfortably. It’s very important because it begins to sensitize you to the various things that you do in the present moment that make yourself uncomfortable. You start with the breathing, and then from there you go into noticing things that the mind does. It all comes under that principle of appropriate attention. Ask questions like, “Where is there discomfort? What can you do to change it?” In other words, instead of trying to stamp out the discomfort immediately, notice, “Okay, what else is going along with it?” Because that’s causing the discomfort. You cut it off at the cause rather than trying to smash it out at the result. So you work with the breath. Get sensitive to know when the breath has come in just enough, when it’s gone out just enough, when you’re pushing and pulling it too much. You watch and observe. You make adjustments. When things get comfortable, you try to spread that sense of comfort throughout the body. There are several reasons for this. One is that you want to make the present as comfortable a place as possible. Secondly, you want to learn how to expand the radius of your gaze. In other words, instead of just looking in one direction, you want to learn how to look 360 degrees all around you. This is where a lot of insight is. It’s catching things that normally happen behind your back or in your blind spot. You learn how to make your gaze all around. You start seeing things that you didn’t notice before. There are basically two ways of getting the mind to settle down. One is to focus it on one very restricted area and just really forcing it to stay there, blanking out everything else. You can get into very strong states of concentration that way, but they’re the type of concentration that actually prevents insight from arising, because that blanking out gives a lot of room for denial. It’s a stashing way that most people like to do with unpleasant things in their own minds, things they don’t want to see, things they don’t want to deal with. Of course, if you can make your gaze more all around, if your concentration is the type where it is centered at one spot, but there’s a sense that your awareness radiates out from that spot to fill everything, that’s the kind of concentration that can lead to insight. It can help get rid of those blind spots that we carry around with us all the time. Whatever direction a thought may come from, you can see it coming, because your gaze is all around. Whatever would disturb your concentration, you can see it and deal with it right away. You find you get the mind in some very good, solid states. That’s why states that are not affected by opening your eyes, getting up, moving around. This is the kind of concentration that you can maintain in all kinds of activities. Once you have the sense of continuity between formally sitting and moving around and doing your daily activities, there seems to be the same centered state of awareness. It gets deeper, more solidly established. As you get more and more familiar with it, then you can ask those questions again, dealing with the four noble truths. Where, even in this good, solid state, is there a sense of stress? Look for it and see what you’re doing that’s causing that stress. Sometimes it takes a while to see it, but as your sensitivities get more refined and more developed, you begin to notice, “Oh yeah, there is stress here.” And it’s accompanied by this action or this movement, this assumption. So you drop it. See what happens then. This way, you begin to catch more and more subtle defilements at the same time. At the same time, your concentration gets more solidly established. In this way, concentration and insight go together. Tranquility and insight go together. The emphasis may be somewhat different, but to get the best results, you want them working together. In other words, to try to get the mind as still as possible, but in a way that’s still and alert and aware. They can ask these questions, “Where is the stress now?” and they just sit there and watch. You have to be like a hunter. Hunters go out in the forest and they have to sit very still, so as not to scare the animals away. But they have to be very alert, so as not to miss the clues of when an animal is around. And they have to be very patient. They can’t go out and say, “Well, at two o’clock I’ll go get that animal and come back.” They have no idea when it’s going to come by, when they’re going to get it. So they have to sit there and just be very, very patient, very consistently alert, to see what direction things will come from. It’s the same when you meditate. You try to get the mind very still and then ask that question, and then just watch. See if you can detect the stress, the movements of the mind that accompany the stress that you can let go of. You can’t let go of the stress, but you can let go of the movements around it that accompany it. Notice how the Buddha describes the duties with regard to the four noble truths. You learn how to comprehend stress. You let go of its cause. So first to comprehend it, you’ve got to see it. Once you see it, you have to learn how to watch it, notice its movements, and then notice what other movements there are in the mind that accompany it. Those are the things you let go. See what happens. Approach the meditation as you would any skill. It requires a lot of attention, a lot of patience, and a lot of sensitivity to what you’re doing. We’re always doing something in the present moment. If we weren’t any input in terms of intention in the present moment, we wouldn’t experience space and time. So as long as there’s space and time, there’s an intention. You want to learn how to watch for those intentions and peel them away. And where do you find them? Any place where there’s stress. Any place where there’s discomfort in the mind. Look there. And if you don’t see any, well, just sit and watch. Try to get yourself at still. Remind yourself you’re a hunter, and hunters can’t be picky about when the rabbit’s going to come and when it’s not going to come. Just do your best to be as alert and as still as possible, asking yourself the right questions. The hunter would ask, “How would you recognize this animal? How would you recognize that animal?” The Buddha gives us the instructions on how to recognize the animals in the mind. Look for the stress. Look for the sense of being burdened in the mind. That’s where all the issues are. And you don’t have to trace them back to the past. The patterns that cause us to suffer are always being reenacted over and over again right now. And it’s enough just to see them in the present moment and say, “Oh my gosh, the mind is doing that.” There’s really no need for it to do that. You drop it. This is how appropriate attention functions in the mind. It helps get the mind still and also learns how to ask the right questions. What’s going on here? And especially what’s going on in terms of the stress, in terms of suffering. When you have the two of those qualities working together, the stillness and the questioning, insight is going to have to come. You can’t decide beforehand when it’s going to come, but you’re always there ready for it, to see whatever moves.

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