Central Question, The

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The early texts define discernment, or measure discernment, in terms of the questions we ask. Appropriate attention, the factor that gives rise to discernment, is defined as paying attention to the right questions. The texts also talk about gauging another person’s discernment by the way that person approaches questions, the way the person frames questions and tries to answer them. So, if we’re going to gain discernment in our practice, we have to learn how to ask questions to begin with. The question that starts discernment and forms the basis for all discernment is a simple one. “What, when I do it, will be for my long-term well-being and happiness?” This is not a contrived or very abstract question. It’s a question that comes from the heart. It comes from looking at life and seeing the changes in life, and seeing how much work we have to put into creating happiness and how quickly it goes. Which leads to the question, “What is it all about? Is there anything we can do that leads to a happiness that’s resistant to change? Or do all our efforts come to naught?” We work hard at creating happiness, and as soon as we get it, it begins to dissolve away. And so we work again, and it dissolves away again. Like the myth, if Sisyphus is rolling that stone up the hill, only to see it roll back down. The question comes, “Is anything worth the effort?” And if so, what? That’s the question that gives rise to discernment. It lies at the basis of everything that we do in this practice. We want a happiness that doesn’t change. We want a happiness that’s worth the effort. This is how the Buddha defines it. The skill, the things that we do that live, give rise to a long-term happiness. We work at the precepts. We work at concentration. Because these activities give rise to a well-being that is more solid than the well-being that might come from breaking the precepts, from letting the mind wander around as it likes. It requires effort, but the effort pays off. Believing that if it’s just the precepts and just concentration, it gives rise to a happiness that may be a little bit more resilient to change, but eventually it does change, too. You can’t get the mind in a state of concentration that will then, on its own, last forever. It’s something that’s willed. It’s something that’s put together, constructed. But the Buddha’s insight was that you could use this constructed state as a basis for developing greater skills, skills that eventually use the process of causation, use the fact of change, the way things change, in such a way that it opens up to something that doesn’t change. That’s what the discernment is for. The basic concepts he uses to develop that kind of discernment all come from that initial question, “What can I do that leads to my long-term well-being and happiness?” In other words, you turn around and you look at the process of action itself, what you do. Then you look very carefully at the results. You judge the results in terms of those three ideas, “my,” “long-term,” and “welfare and happiness.” That’s where the teaching and the three characteristics come from. “My” corresponds to the teaching on anatta, “long-term” to the teaching on anicca, or inconstancy, “welfare and happiness” to the teaching on dukkha, or suffering and stress. He points out that if the results of our actions really are going to lead to a happiness that’s satisfactory, a happiness that’s worth the effort, they can’t fall under these three characteristics, yet so much of our happiness does. But he doesn’t give up there. He says, “Look at the happiness you develop, say, in the course of developing your concentration. See exactly where it is stressful, where it is inconstant. Learn to stop doing the things that make it stressful, that make it inconstant.” This is what refines our concentration. In other words, you have to be very observant about what you’re doing. When I was preparing for that course in Bari, the Four Bases of Power, looking at different articles, different books on developing a skill, they all made the point that when you practice, you don’t just go through the motions. You don’t just put in brute effort. As you practice again and again and again, you have to watch to see what it is that you’re doing that’s inefficient, wasted effort. You learn how to stop wasting that effort. If you’re not observant in this way, no matter how much practice you have, it’s not going to develop a skill. It’s like that line from Ajahn Chah. He says, “Simply sitting and meditating long hours is not going to get you anywhere unless you’re observant.” He says he’s seen many chickens sit for hours and hours and hours on their nest and they don’t gain awakening. It’s not just in the sitting. It’s in being observant while you sit, being observant while you meditate. Notice what you’re doing that’s inefficient, what you’re doing that’s creating unnecessary stress, unnecessary effort, and learning to eliminate it. The teachings on inconstancy and stress are just those guidelines to watch for what’s inefficient in the way you meditate, inefficient in the way you try to bring the mind to stillness, bring the mind to concentration. The teaching on anatta is to remind you to let go of it. If it’s stressful, it’s not really you or yours. It’s not under your control. If it’s inconstant, it’s not something you really want to hold on to. So you use these three characteristics to judge the results of your actions, to bring the mind to greater and greater refinement. So that your efforts are not wasted. Your efforts do lead to a happiness that’s more and more solid, a well-being, a sense of ease that’s resistant to change. As you work away at this question, you finally open up to a different dimension entirely. As you see that even the states of concentration you can bring the mind to have their element of stress. As one of the passages says, you see whatever there is of form, feeling, perception, thought constructs, or consciousness in that state of concentration as being, what they say, a cancer, a disease, an arrow, alien, a void, inconstant, stressful, not self. That eventually opens you up to the deathless. This is as far as those two teachings can take you. All things constructed are inconstant. All things constructed are stressful. It’s interesting how the third characteristic, “I’m not self,” fits into all this. Up to that point, the Buddha’s argument, “Anything that’s stressful, anything that’s inconstant, is stressful. Anything stressful is not self.” So you would think that the phrase would be sabbe sankaranatah, but it’s not. It’s sabbe tamanatah. All phenomena constructed or not constructed are not self. What’s the purpose of that statement? As the passage notices, when you have that experience of the deathless, there can be a passion, there can be delight in the deathless. If that happens, it leads to non-returning. When you can let go of that passion, let go of that delight, that’s when the path leads to arhantship. So it is possible, even when you have an experience of the deathless, to have a sense of identification, a sense of delight with it, which is why that teaching, sabbe tamanatah, is needed, to remind yourself that even that is not to be clung to. So those teachings on the Three Characteristics come from that very simple question, “What can I do that will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?” They’re there to judge the results of your actions. Anything that doesn’t measure up, you let go. As for the things that do seem to measure up in terms of a lasting well-being, a lasting sense of stability, use that as the path. After all, what are you going to use for the path if you don’t use inconstant things? You can’t use nirvana as the path. It doesn’t function in any way at all. But you take whatever seems to be more solid, more lasting, more satisfying in terms of the results of your actions, and use that as the path, and keep refining your sensitivity to what is long-lasting, what is stressful and not stressful. That takes you all the way to the brink of the deathless. Then you have to be careful not to get wound up in the light and the fact that you finally got there. So you start out with concepts of “my long-term welfare and happiness,” and use the three characteristics to take them apart, to put them to use, but also to take them apart to get you to where you really want to go. There’s a paradox here that you use those concepts to get you where you want to go, but there comes a point where you have to take them apart in order really to get there. But it all comes from that initial, very heartfelt question, “Is there anything that’s really worth doing, all this effort that I put into my life?” Will it ever give results that are worthwhile? Will it ever reach a point where you don’t have to keep putting an effort in? Buddha’s answer is yes, if you follow his path and learn how to refine your question. It’s in the process of refinement that it takes you where you want to go. Then you can put the question aside. It’s been answered. There are so many times you read in Buddhist books that they throw up a lot of paradoxes and then say, “Well, just sort of accept the paradox, accept the idea that things don’t fit together, that things don’t make sense, and just give up your questioning mind.” That’s not really a Buddhist teaching. The Buddhist teaching is learning to realize that there are questions that really do deserve an answer, and this is one of them. In fact, this is the basic question that deserves an answer. “Is there anything I can do that leads to long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s a question you grab onto and hold onto it and demand an answer. There’s a passage where Jahn Mahaprabhu talks about it in Jahn Mahan’s final sermon. He’s saying there’s one thing that you don’t let go of in your practice, and that’s your determination not to come back and suffer again. It’s basically the same thing as saying that you don’t let go of this question, “What can I do that will be for my long-term welfare and happiness?” Use all the tools the Buddha gives you in order to find the true answer to that. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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