Alertness

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One of the qualities essential to meditation, in fact essential to the whole practice, is alertness. The texts define it as being aware of what you’re doing. This is where the meditation ties in with the teaching on karma, that while you’re meditating, you have to be really alert, conscious of your input into what you’re doing. That’s what makes it a skill but also provides the basis for the insights we’re trying to gain, seeing how much we really do shape what we’re doing right now, and getting a sense of the intentions behind that, the skill with which we’re doing it, and also the pervasiveness of this. It’s constant shaping that’s going on all the time. It’s a part of our awareness that we tend to block out. We’re more focused on things outside. This person did that, that person did this, and many times we forget what we did to cause that person to do what he or she did. Or we look at what’s happening in our meditation and we say, “It’s either a bad day for the meditation or my mind’s not in the right mood.” We don’t see what we’re doing right now that could possibly change that bad meditation. So try to develop this quality. Be alert to what you’re doing when you’re focusing on the breath. Be alert not only to the breath but also to the act of focusing. This is what enables you to develop a sense of skill with the meditation. Sometimes you reflect after the fact as to what you did. Other times you try to notice what you’re doing while you’re doing it so you see the immediate cause-and-effect relationship. Part of your alertness is to see when it’s proper to do that kind of analysis and when to put it aside. Sometimes you get into good states of concentration and you don’t want to analyze it too much. If you start analyzing it, you destroy the concentration. So in cases like that, you wait until later, particularly when you find yourself in a state of concentration and you’re still fresh to it, you’re still new to it. John Fruin gives the analogy of pouring concrete. If the concrete hasn’t yet set, you don’t want to take away the forms. In other words, when it’s going well, you don’t dare do anything different, even to step back to analyze it. Until it’s really solidified. When that state of mind is solidified, then you can step back. If you find stepping back destroys it, then don’t step back. Stay with that state. Even as you’re staying with that state, there’ll be a little part of the mind that notices the fact that this is the time not to analyze. So you stay immersed in that state of concentration. When it solidifies and you get more used to it and get more sensitive to what’s going on, then you can begin to analyze and step back a little bit to see what you’re doing. How did you get the mind there? What are you doing in the present moment that’s keeping it there? It’s in seeing that present input that a lot of the insight lies. Many times you can see the drawbacks, say, of a particular sensual pleasure. You can see the drawbacks, the suffering or the unsatisfactory nature of a lot of life in general. But if you don’t see your input into it, that insight is not enough to free you. After all, lots of people have been talking about how miserable the world is since way before the Buddha. And if it’s just complaining, then it goes nowhere. That’s the kind of attitude that is rightly labeled as pessimism. Things are bad and there’s just no way out. But the Buddha came along and found that the reason things are bad is because of what you’re doing. And you can change what you do. There is that alternative. There is that escape. So that was the nature of his insight, to see what he was doing in the present moment. That night of his awakening, he gained the three knowledges. He gained knowledge of past lives, knowledge of the passing away and re-arising of beings, and then finally knowledge of the ending of what they call the mental effluents or the mental fermentations. These things that come oozing out of the mind and keep it bound, constantly wandering on. That second insight was insight into the nature of the present moment. The nature of karma, the role that action plays in shaping people’s lives. And in the third insight, what the Buddha did was turn around and look at the karma he was doing right then and there, what he was doing that was causing suffering, causing stress, and also seeing what he could do to stop doing that, to abandon the cause of that stress, which was the craving and the ignorance. So that quality of alertness that he developed in the path was what enabled the insight to happen. And John Lee has an interesting passage where he talks about mindfulness and alertness, lying at the essence of meditation practice and how when you finally reach insight, mindfulness turns into jhana, or knowledge, and alertness turns into direct seeing. You directly see what you’re doing to cause suffering. And you develop the knowledge that shows you how to stop doing that. That knowledge comes from your mindfulness. So, these simple qualities that we’re working on here—mindfulness, keeping something in mind, and alertness, keeping watch for what we’re doing—these are the things that, as they get strengthened, enable us to gain insight. The mindfulness is what gives us some sense of what alternatives there are. If we don’t see there’s any alternative for what we’re doing, we just keep on doing the same old thing. But mindfulness reminds us there is something else. Many times in the text, the Buddha talks about how people’s normal escape from the drudgery or the unsatisfactory nature of their lives is to look for sensual pleasure, because they think that’s the only way out. Mindfulness is what reminds us there is another out. We may dwell on how much we like our sensual pleasures and we dwell on how much we dislike pain. It’s that act of dwelling on these things that keeps us tied down. The pleasure and the pains don’t tie us down. It’s the way we react to them. That’s what ties us down. It’s the way we react to them and the way we keep creating them. So part of the practice, as the Buddha pointed out, is to get the mind into states of concentration. Develop a sense of pleasure that doesn’t have to have that dwelling. In other words, the Buddha says there is an alternative to pain, and it’s not sensual pleasure. It’s the pleasure of the jhanas, the pleasure of concentration. In other words, you look for another out, you look for another alternative. Keep that in mind, the fact that these alternatives are there. Then as you develop that alternative and you develop the mind, you keep in mind the fact that there’s a deathless, something that lies outside of this. Without that, you’re afraid to let go of your jhanas. This was the problem with the teachers that the Buddha studied with before his awakening. They didn’t think there could be any alternative. If you left that state of jhana, you just go back to your ordinary sensual pleasures and pains, and they didn’t want to do that. So they were afraid to let go. The Buddha reasoned there must be an alternative, which is why he was willing to let things go. He was willing to experiment to see what the other alternatives were. Unfortunately, we have his example. So as you get the mind into a really good state, you don’t have to be afraid that by letting go you necessarily will have to go back to ordinary levels of awareness, ordinary levels of pleasure and pain. If the mind is really solid, really mindful, really aware, really alert to see what it’s doing, it begins to see that there are other alternatives. Mindfulness and alertness are very basic qualities in the mind. Simply keeping something in mind and watching what you’re doing. These are things that were taught by our parents way back. The Buddha shows that if you’re really, really mindful, really alert, these qualities, when they’re thoroughly developed, can lead to another sort of happiness, another sort of well-being altogether. It’s because of the nature of action, the nature of experience, that they do this. If our experiences were not shaped by our actions, there’d be no need for alertness. Alertness couldn’t do anything for us, but the fact that being alert to what you’re doing does make a difference. It depends on the fact that what you’re doing makes a difference. If you were to ask what the Buddha’s most basic teaching was, it’s the teaching on karma. Everyone agrees that it’s basic. Most people think of it in the sense of elementary. Actually it’s basic in the sense that it permeates everything. His understanding of action, how action shapes our experiences, how action can be mastered so it takes us beyond our ordinary wandering on and opens us up to the Deathless. It is a basic teaching, but it’s not simply elementary. It’s pervasive. It provides the context for everything else. So always keep that context in mind. You can see the unsatisfaction, but in nature you can see that things are inconstant, stressful, and not-self. But unless you see what your participation is doing to make things inconstant, stressful, and not-self, the insight just simply can’t chip away at your ordinary attachments. There’ll always be that sense inside, “Well, if something better came along, I’d be happier.” It’s important to realize that because you have to change your habits, that’s what will make you happier. That’s where real work can be done. And it’s right here that the work has to be done, has to be focused.

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