Testing Your Insights

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There’s a sutta where the Buddha says there are two things that give rise to discernment. One is appropriate attention, and the other is the voice of another person. That second factor is probably most obvious in the other suttas where we hear that the Buddha is teaching somebody as they were meditating, and at the end of his discourse they gained awakening. Basically, his voice, or what he was saying, was telling them to look at things with appropriate attention, helping them to ask the right questions, sparking appropriate attention in their minds. Of course, appropriate attention is learning how to see things in terms of fornible truths, seeing where there’s suffering, where there’s the craving in the mind, the craving that causes the suffering, so you let go of it. In other words, looking at everything in terms of the question of suffering and the end of suffering, stress and the end of stress. Those are terms that we rarely use in our lives. Most of us are more in our narratives. This happened, that happened, and then this person did this, and then I did that, and then you did that. Or he or she did that. Or the things that we want to do at the end of the meditation session, whatever, the other issues that we get involved in. It’s very rare that we just look at things purely in terms of where there’s suffering, where there’s the cause of suffering, what qualities we can develop to bring the end of suffering about. So we have to gain practice in thinking in those ways. It’s interesting that in that particular passage, the Buddha doesn’t mention concentration at all. In other passages, he talks about concentration as a prerequisite for discernment. But always in the list of factors, their appropriate attention has to find its place someplace, whether it’s prior to the concentration or immediately together with the concentration. There has to be the ability to ask those questions. Otherwise, the concentration just sits there. Or even worse, while you’re sitting in meditation, you ask yourself the wrong questions and you can get spinning off into all kinds of theories. There’s that sutta where the Buddha talks about the basis for two different kinds of wrong view. Many times it comes from the wrong view. When people are sitting and meditating and weird things come up in their meditation, they might get a state of concentration and reflect back on their previous lifetimes, if they can remember them. Because they only reflect back one or two lifetimes, they get a very limited idea of what happened, and then they base a lot of theories on that. So the concentration itself is no guarantee that you’re going to get wisdom. It has to come together with other properties. After all, there are eight factors in the path, right? Right view is right there at the beginning. So it’s good that we reflect on right view, get used to thinking in terms of right view, so that when concentration does come, it has the background it needs to give rise to the discernment we’re looking for. There are two levels of right view. One is mundane, which starts with the principle of karma, and also includes the conviction that there are people who have come to the end of suffering. When they teach, they know what they’re talking about. That gives us the conviction that we’re on the right path. It’s not a groping around in the dark. But again, their teaching focuses back on what we’re doing right now. It’s our karma, looking at what we ourselves have done and not done. It’s getting very sensitive to our own actions. This is why the Buddha’s very first teaching to Rahula, once he’d established the principle of truthfulness, was the principle of looking at your actions, seeing the results that they get, focusing on your actions here in the present moment, learning the principle of cause and effect right there. It’s interesting to note that the other passages of Dharma teachings aimed at young people keep focusing on this issue of cause and effect, be very sensitive to cause and effect. There’s that series of questions for the novices. It’s kind of like a catechism. What is one? What is two? What is three? What is four? What is five? What is six? What is seven? What is eight? What is nine? What is 10? What is 11? What is 12? What is 13? You realize how much work goes into simply the fact that you get food to keep your body going. If you don’t get the food, you die. It’s like you’re born with this big gaping need right here, and you have to keep looking after it, looking after it, looking after it. How are you going to do it in such a way that you’re not imposing more than is necessary? So again, the issue is cause and effect and what you’re doing in the midst of this process of cause and effect. This is helpful in two ways in the concentration. One, it keeps you focused on the fact that if you’re going to get your mind concentrated, it depends on you, on your own actions. But also, once the mind is concentrated, it keeps you focused on what you’re doing. Years back in Thailand, there was a woman who came and was meditating up in the jetty on the hill on what Thomas had hit. As she was meditating, this vision of a gold platter came, and she actually reached out and tried to grab the gold platter. Of course, that pulled her out of concentration. What happened there was that she lost sense of what she was doing. She totally focused on the platter without thinking about what she was doing to grab it. She wasn’t paying any attention to the craving that came up in her own mind. She was focused more on the platter. But the teachings of Right View, the teachings of appropriate attention, would focus you back on what you’re doing, how you’re reacting to things. Try to get more and more sensitive to that and realize that there is a cause and effect pattern here, and what you’re doing is the major factor in that cause and effect pattern. So you’d better be sensitive to it, clear about it. When you’re focused in this way, then, as the mind gets into concentration, you begin to notice things that you wouldn’t have noticed otherwise. When it comes out of concentration, you notice things, how the mind zips out. There’s almost a physical sensation of flowing as you leave the breath and your attention. Your attention goes out and inhabits the world outside. While you’re in concentration, there can also be a very subtle sensitivity to what you’re doing to maintain the concentration. If you keep yourself focused here, then it’s a lot more likely that discernment will arise. You begin to catch yourself doing things that you didn’t notice before. In the way you focus, in the way you frame issues, in the way you make decisions, it’s in seeing these things that discernment arises. You catch yourself doing things you didn’t see. This is very, very important, because we’re doing these things all the time. All the things that the Buddha talks about as causes of suffering. Intention is buried way down in there, and it’s our intentions that we tend to cover up. The whole process of concentration is meant to open up to ourselves. It’s an important part of the practice. It’s not just getting the mind still, but also learning where you should focus your attention. It’s on this doing part of the mind. Be clear about what it’s doing as it’s focusing in and gaining concentration, how you can get the mind to settle down, how you can learn how to feel good with a breath. Be sensitive to various ways that you squeeze the breath simply when you’re in the act of focusing. Sometimes the way you focus creates pressure on the breath. The way you focus tends to block out areas of your awareness, and then you notice what you can do to compensate for that. As you get more and more sensitive to the fact that what you’re doing is shaping your experience, you’re looking directly in the area where insight can arise. So concentration, even though it’s listed as a cause of discernment, isn’t sufficient. You can’t trust that everything that comes into your mind when it’s quiet is going to be discernment. It has to be framed with the right questions. You have to learn where to focus, and this is what the questions do. They focus your attentions on the right spot. It’s also useful for testing your insights when they arise. Once something appears to you in the meditation, you can’t just take it as the truth right then and there. You have to put a little question mark beside it and say, “I’ve got to test this.” This is what helps protect you from your insights. We’re here looking for insight, but then sometimes when they come, they may not be genuine insights. You can’t know in time until you’ve tested them. Some, of course, will be obvious when they spring up, but others are not so obvious, so you’ve got to be careful. Again, it’s a question of what happens as a result if you follow this particular insight and act on it. As you develop this quality, looking at cause and effect, using appropriate attention, you become more and more independent as a meditator. You can rely more and more on yourself so that you develop within the mind all the factors that you really need for insight to be truly liberating, truly trustworthy, something you can depend on.

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