Essense of Discernment, The

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Sometimes people think of the practice as a form of self-improvement. But if you think of it that way, you get tied up in all kinds of knots. Which is the self that’s doing the improving? Which is the self that’s being improved? What kind of improvement is needed? All kinds of theories are out there. And you find all kinds of theories inside yourself when you start thinking in these terms. Then there’s the question of how the self can improve itself if it’s got problems. It’s better to think of the practice as action-improvement, word-improvement, thought-improvement. Because these are things that you can actually focus on and improve. You can see for yourself what’s wrong. You say something and it causes suffering. You think in a certain way and it causes suffering. You do things and they cause suffering. It’s obvious. When you look at things in that way, what needs to be improved? The teaching is here to give you some pointers on how to do it. Look at your intentions, look at the results of your actions, and make adjustments accordingly. This principle starts from the most basic parts of the practice, simply in terms of your external actions, and goes all the way inside. When you’re sitting here meditating, again, it’s an action-improvement, noticing how the mind thinks, how you direct your thoughts. What kind of thoughts are helpful to bring the mind settling down? What kinds are not helpful? If you look carefully and consistently, you see these things as they happen. The teachings are here to give you ideas on how you might make changes. So always keep the practice immediate. Keep it direct. What’s happening right here, right now? What you’re doing? What intentions are going on in the mind right here, right now? What are the results of your actions? Even the most abstract teachings, like the teaching on emptiness, the Buddha explains it as emptiness of disturbance. The presence of disturbance, where does that come from? It comes from what you’re doing, the way you focus the mind, and how you might do it with more and more finesse. If there were easy one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten instructions, if the mind worked that way, then things would be pretty straightforward. It wouldn’t require too much sensitivity on your part. But it turns out that your own sensitivity is important here, too. Without that, there’s no real insight. If you’re simply adopting somebody else’s insights and imposing them on the mind without checking for the results, you never really see anything. It just becomes one more straitjacket for the mind, one more mold in which you try to pour things. But the teachings encourage you to be sensitive, because they themselves are not simple lists. You look at them on paper and they seem to be a simple list. There’s the Eightfold Path, there’s the Seven Factors for Awakening, the Four This, the Five That. But when you actually get down into looking at the details, you find that the relationships among the various factors tend to be pretty complex. It’s not just linear. There are feedback loops. There’s what you might even call holographic patterns, where one factor is what contains a few of the other ones. The teachings are this way because the mind is that way as well. The mind has lots of feedback loops. And if we’re going to deal with them, we have to be very sensitive to what the mind needs, what’s appropriate for any one particular circumstance. Because the mind has its rhythms as well. As you sit here and meditate, there are times when you find that you really want actively to understand something. The mind has all sorts of energy to analyze things. There are other times when all it wants is just to settle down and be snug with its object. And you have to learn how to be sensitive to that, because the mind does have its needs. Sometimes simply allowing the mind to be still makes a lot of changes. Nothing seems to be happening. Just there with a breath, and no thinking. Nothing else is going on. Just totally with the breath. And even any question of moving on, analyzing something, the mind doesn’t respond. It needs to rest. What’s like sleep? Sleep does an awful lot for the body. It’s like putting medicine on your skin. The medicine just seems to sit there, but actually it’s doing its work. The skin needs to be next to the medicine for a long time. It starts soaking up whatever it needs to get from the medicine, and that takes time. So if you find the mind hits a stretch when it needs to be still, allow it to be still. Then you’ll find some deep changes going on in the mind as a result. They may be hard to detect, but over time you begin to sense them and be ready for them. Over time, when the mind is ready, come back out and do some more analysis, do more investigating, more probing around. It’s one of the reasons why the breath is an ideal object for meditation, because it can be both the place where you settle down to be still and the object that you analyze. Analyze the breath. Analyze the mind’s relationship to the breath. Analyze your intentions, your perceptions that deal with the breath. There’s a lot to play with there. A lot to investigate if the mind is up for the investigation. If it’s not, the breath is extremely soothing, both for the body and for the mind, if you just stay with it. And don’t be afraid when people accuse you of being in stump concentration, because sometimes that’s what the mind needs precisely. The problem comes when the mind begins to sense that it’s had enough and it’s ready to go on to investigate, and yet you don’t want to. It’s like waking up in the morning and you just want to roll over and sleep for another hour or two, even though the body has had its fill of sleep. That’s when attachment to concentration becomes a problem. But if there’s something deep down inside that doesn’t want to budge, you don’t have to budge it. Just stay right there. Let the mind soak in that concentration, because the mind, like the body, needs to rest from time to time. It has its rhythms. The body’s rhythms are pretty predictable following the twenty-four hour clock. The mind’s rhythms are less predictable, which is why you have to be very sensitive to what it needs. It’s when the mind begins to get still, like this, don’t be afraid that you’ve reverted or that you’re regressing. Again, that becomes an issue of the self. What kind of person am I? Where am I in the practice? What kind of progress am I making? Put those thoughts aside. Keep asking yourself, “What’s the most skillful thing to do now? What needs to be done now?” In the beginning, it requires a lot of instruction and asking the right questions to get sensitive to what needs to be done. But over time, you begin to get a more intuitive sense of your own, what the mind needs, what a particular situation needs. So picking up on the fact that the mind needs to rest, that’s actually a function of discernment. Picking up on the fact that it’s had enough, that’s also a function of discernment. If there are easy rules of thumb for this, practice would be a lot easier. It would be a lot easier to teach. But that’s not the way the mind is. The mind is complex. But still, it’s not so complex that we can’t come to understand it if we’re observant enough and continuous enough in our powers of observation. So again, this comes down to that principle of being sensitive to what you’re doing and being sensitive to what the results are. Not being too quick to judge the results. Watch things over time. In this way, whether the mind is very quiet or whether it’s more analytical, you develop sensitivity either way, which lies at the essence of the discernment that we’re trying to develop.

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