Stepping Back

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The different sets of dharmas that make up the wings to awakening, there’s always a discernment factor. And in the different sets, it’s defined differently. The Eightfold Path is defined as seeing things in terms of the Four Noble Truths. The Five Strengths and the Five Faculties are defined in addition to the Four Noble Truths as seeing things arising and passing away. The Seven Factors of Awakening is defined as analysis of dharmas and particularly seeing what’s going on in the mind in terms of skillful and unskillful. This last one is an interesting one. We often think of Buddhist insight, or the discernment factor, as seeing things in terms of the three characteristics. The question is, where is the three characteristics in this one? One of the important ways you can look for the three characteristics is simply seeing that process of stepping back from your mind and seeing what’s going on in your mind as skillful and unskillful. That involves a certain element of letting go of self-identity in your thoughts, in your moods, that stream of chatter going through your mind. And the less articulate feelings that come up. As long as you identify with these things, you can’t see whether they’re skillful or not. They’re simply the way you are. But if you learn how to step back, that’s when you can begin to gain some discernment. As the Buddha once said, he got on the right path before his awakening when he learned how to step back and look at his thoughts and see which ones were skillful and which ones were not. That’s the beginning of the insight into not-self, learning how to let go of your identification with things, not seeing them as one and the same with you. So this is an important element in the practice. It’s the beginning level of discernment, the ability to step back and look at your thoughts not in terms of being your thoughts, but simply being a process that’s going through the mind. At this level, you can still identify with your mind because it’s pointing you in the right direction to look inside your mind to see where problems are in your life, where the suffering is coming from. It’s so easy to focus on things outside, people outside, conditions outside, but that goes nowhere. Because if you’re focused out there, you’re not really aware of what you’re doing. And when you’re not aware of what you’re doing, there’s ignorance and there’s craving, and there’s just creating more conditions for things outside. And you just get worse and worse and worse. What you have to do is turn around and look inside, and then learn how to step back a bit. So even though at this level there’s still some identification with your mind as opposed to other people’s, it’s a useful distinction. The important thing is you learn how to step back from the contents of the mind, the processes going through the mind, the things that set the mind on fire. It’s one of the reasons we practice Kali. Concentration is to give the mind a vantage point. It can stay at one spot, stay with a breath, or whatever your object is. Learn how to stay there with a sense of ease and well-being. Not that you’re using that as a place to run away from everything else, but you’re giving yourself a good foundation at which you can look at everything else that’s going on in your mind. Especially as the concentration develops that quality that’s called cittahlahutta, tenderness of mind. Not tenderness in the sense of being weak, but being extremely sensitive to what’s going on. When you find that center inside where you really can begin to open up and it feels tender, sensitive inside, but it feels good that it’s opening up, it’s been closed and tightly encased for such a long period of time. Once that begins to open up and you try to keep that open, you begin to see the ravages of greed, the ravages of anger, the ravages of delusion as they come rampaging through your mind. They step all over that very sensitive center. As long as these things are allowed to have free reign in the mind, you’ll find that sensitive center just closes right up. You’re causing yourself too much suffering to keep that open. So you have to learn how to keep those things reigned in. But the important thing is that you’re giving yourself a place that you can be very sensitive to. As the stronger ones, the stronger defilements, begin to fade away, fade away, you can be sensitive to the more subtle ones. Without that inner sensitivity, the subtle ones come and go and you don’t see them at all. It’s just part of the background noise, the way things ordinarily are, and you don’t want to be picking up on them because you haven’t opened up this tender center in the mind that can be accessed through concentration practice. So you want to use that tender center as a way of gauging, noticing when the mind is on the rampage or when thoughts in the mind are on the rampage. You don’t have to identify them with the chores, your greed, your anger, your fear, whatever. It’s just that these things are coming through the mind. And if you allow them to grow, they’re just going to step all over any kind of inner sensitivity, which means that you can’t see. And even when you do get a state of concentration, it’s kind of a hardened concentration that doesn’t provide a really good basis for any kind of insight. So you have to work on maintaining this center here and then protecting it. And you begin to see that the ravages that conditions outside or people outside cause us are nothing compared to the ones that our own mind can set fire to us and leave us. If you think the countryside around San Diego looks burned now, you look at your mind. Anger has come roaring through. Greed has come roaring through. Fear, delusion, these things come roaring through as fires. And any kind of inner sensitivity just shuts up, grows itself a hard shell. And when there are shells in the mind like this, there’s no insight. So we work on allowing the mind to open up. You get more and more sensitive here to the breath. As you learn how to treat the breath more gently, with more skill, things will naturally begin to open up inside. And you’ll see the damage that the defilements can cause and how you don’t want to give them reign. The lucky thing is that when the mind is sensitive like this, you can begin to detect them, even when they’re very, very gentle. And at that point, you have to be very careful that the normal thought patterns of the mind—say, your anger is justified, or your greed is justified, or your fear is justified—you’ve got to learn not to listen to them. So it’s in this way that concentration gives rise to insight. Mindfulness gives rise to insight. Ultimately, you’ll have to learn how to step back from the mind. You’ll have to learn how to step back even from the concentration. And that’s the five-factor noble concentration. With each of the four levels of jhana, there’s a fifth factor, where you can step back in the same way that a person standing up can look at a person sitting down, or a person sitting down can look at a person lying down. You’re a little bit above the state of concentration itself, where you can observe even the drawbacks of that concentration. But there’s no way you can get to that insight until you’ve used the concentration itself. It’s a place to step back from other events in the mind, the unskillful thoughts in the mind, unskillful moods, unskillful emotions. We here in the West tend to want to go straight to the most delicate stuff, the most subtle stuff, without going through the steps. Yet, if you don’t go through the intermediate steps, you can never get to the subtle ones. So work on developing your concentration. Keep it tender, and then keep it there as your vantage point, not just a place where you just run off and hide in a little hole to run away from the world. But we can turn around and really step back from the thought processes in your mind. Watch them as they come, as they go. You’ve got this large range of awareness filling your body, so you can watch these things coming and going without your latching onto them. When you watch them come and go, you begin to see, where they come from, where they go. That’s how you can see what’s skillful, what’s not skillful, and also you can see what are the underlying causes that you can work on so the unskillful thoughts don’t take over the mind and the skillful qualities do get stronger and stronger. So we’re stepping back. It’s this ability to step back. It’s implicit in the ability to step back is at least some insight into not-self that you don’t have to identify with these things coming through. These are patterns which we often think that greed, anger, and delusion have been very useful to us in the past. Our greed has gotten us what we’ve been able to grab hold of in life. Our anger has helped us get rid of people we don’t like. But there comes a point when you begin to realize that they’re self-defeating, and you look at the long-term results, and the damage isn’t worth it. So think of the point where you practice this ability to step back. It’s the beginning of insight, the ability to step back and look at what’s going on without having to identify with everything that comes through the mind. No matter how much it roars in our ears, we can still say, “No, I’m not going there. I just want to watch where you’re coming from, where you’re going.” That’s how this ability to distinguish between skillful and unskillful is related to the three characteristics. You see that these things are impermanent, and they are stressful, but they’re not self. You don’t have to identify with them. In that insight, you begin to see their causes. And when you can see their causes, that’s how you can undercut them. If they’re unskillful now, you can encourage them if they’re skillful. So that’s how this quality called Dhammavicaya, analysis of Dhammas, connects to the insight on not-self. We now have the very simple practice in our lives of looking at what we’re doing, saying, and thinking. Stepping back from it is connected with the highest levels of insight. You can’t have the higher level of insight without this ability to step back. So if you hope for practice in the practice, this is an ability you really have to focus on in everything you do.

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