Appropriate Attention

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The Buddha once said that of all the external factors that give rise to awakening and give rise to discernment, the most important is the voice of another person. In other words, the words that point you to look in important places or suggest that you take a particular stance or a particular approach to what you’re doing. Of the internal factors, he said, the most important is appropriate attention, that ability for you, yourself, to ask the right questions. The external factor can’t do its work unless the internal factor is active, which is why you’re constantly reminded while you’re sitting here meditating and listening to a Dhamma talk that most of your attention should go to the meditation, because that’s where the problem lies. You’re learning to be more sensitive to what you’re doing. Appropriate attention comes down to just that, being sensitive to what the mind is doing, either causing suffering or causing a lack of suffering. And that’s an issue of skill. This is why that old question of “Are you going to work for the awakening of yourself or for the awakening of other people?” is a false issue. Because awakening comes about through the learning of a skill. And this is something that no one can do for anyone else. Each of us has to work on the skillfulness of his or her own mind, which is why it’s an individual matter. It depends a great deal on what attention you pay to what you’re doing and looking at things in terms of cause and effect. Suffering and stress and lack of suffering and stress are the Four Noble Truths. The Buddha taught these truths before anything else. Because they’re so basic, they permeate the entire teaching. Just as when you’re learning tennis, the first thing they do is teach you to keep your eye on the ball. Not because that’s an easy thing that you can learn and then forget about as you go on to more advanced practices in tennis, but because it’s basic to everything else. If you don’t keep your eye on the ball, then all the other skills you learn in tennis can’t be put together in any way that’s going to help you win. The same with all the teachings. They all come out of this set of truths, this way of looking at things in terms of cause and effect, skillful and unskillful causes, desirable and undesirable results. So where do you see that? Most clearly in what you do. This is why the teaching is always an issue of what you’re doing and why karma is another one of those teachings that’s basic. Not because it’s elementary, but because it permeates everything. The mind is constantly doing things, so you want to be clear about what you’re doing. So there are instructions. The Four Noble Truths give instructions on what to do with regard to a particular truth. You try to comprehend suffering. When you see its cause, you abandon its cause, develop the factors that lead to the end of suffering, and try to realize what it is to put an end to suffering. These are all things to do. In building up to them, the Buddha gives a whole series of other practices that make you more and more sensitive to the role that your actions play in what you’re experiencing. It tells you to be generous with your time, your energy. So you see what comes up in the mind as you try to be generous. It tells you to observe the precepts so you can have a greater sensitivity, more alertness to what you’re actually doing. It’s like holding up a mirror so you can see yourself. And with the meditation, when you’ve been actively working on being sensitive to your actions and how they shape your experience, then you’re ready to meditate. A lot of people think that meditation is simply a question of opening your mind and somehow things will come together on their own, and there you have it, awakening. In fact, I’ve read some meditation teachers say that you basically sit there very quietly waiting for an accident to happen, something that has to come on its own. But it doesn’t just come on its own. You have to be doing things. In fact, one of the really important insights that leads to awakening is realizing what you did that got you there. Without that understanding, it’s not really discernment and it doesn’t really cut through things. You have to understand what it means to act, how actions are related to results. Then you see that in the crucible of your meditation as you work with trying to get the mind to settle down. Once it has settled down, learning to stay with it for long periods of time. We can’t be impatient with this, because staying with the meditation, tuning into a particular dimension of awareness, takes time to release. You have to work on the mind to soften things up. Notice this as you get the mind to settle down here. Then when you get up, you walk away and you meet up with things you don’t like. How does the mind react? Can it maintain its equanimity? Can it maintain its stillness in the face of things you don’t like? This is one of the tests that Ajaan Fuang often gave. If you’d see one of his students was getting into a good state of concentration, he’d say things to make the student angry, to get the student upset. The purpose being not to trick the student, but to alert the student there’s work to be done. Which is more important, your old opinions or this new state of concentration that you’re working on? You’ve got to work on that. Then you find that in the course of trying to maintain this sense of stillness, this inner center, throughout the day, you see things coming up in the mind that you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. Because you’re now standing still, or at least making an effort to stand still. Whereas before, you’re just floating around wherever the currents took you. An image they give is of duckweed. It floats on the surface of the water, and wherever the currents go, there goes the duckweed. That’s what most people’s minds are like. Like a boat that doesn’t have an anchor. The current just takes the boat wherever it wants to go, wherever the current wants to go, not where the boat wants to go. If you put an anchor down, then you begin to get a sense of which direction the currents are going, and how strong they are. Sometimes the currents are too strong for your anchor, and pull the boat away anyhow. So you’ve got to work on making that anchor a lot more firm, a lot more steady. Give more weight to the anchor. It’s interesting, the word “weight” in Pali is also related to the word for “respect.” Respect for your concentration. Don’t throw it away easily. Sometimes we can get complacent. We find the mind settles down regularly. Every time you sit down, there it is. Every time you sit down, there it is. You can get complacent. And the day will come, because you’re complacent, that you sit down and it’s not there. So always be heedful. Always have respect for your concentration. Sometimes it seems so unpresupposing. It’s just a little quietude in the mind. Nothing much. It doesn’t require a lot of intelligence. It’s just there. But it is your anchor. It is your frame of reference. It’s what allows you to see all the other things you want to see in the mind. So treat it with care. Give it some weight. Give it respect. The Buddha gives advice once the mind settles down in a good state of concentration. He says, “Try to acquire confidence in the object of your concentration. Indulge in it. Immerse yourself in it. Steady yourself in it. Settle in.” And this is where the meditation becomes less an exercise that you do from time to time, but something that’s going to rearrange your mind, rearrange your values. You have to give respect. You have to give weight to this. It’s only when this stillness, this steadiness, has real weight in the mind, it’s time to seep into the mind, rearrange things, that you can start seeing things again. Because you’re rearranging your whole way of looking at life. The Buddha says, “See things in terms of stress and lack of stress, cause and effect, which are rarely the terms with which we look in life.” This person, that person, this group of people, that group of people, this historical force, our opinions get all tied up and the abstractions get away from these simple issues that the Buddha’s asking us to focus on. Again, we have to give respect to those issues as well. Give them weight. Once the mind is settled in, then it can really see things for what they are. Because concentration, staying with this one perception that keeps you, say, with a breath, or with a still breath in the body, or the sense of space, whatever it is, whatever the perception you’re focused on. To really see it, to really understand it, means you have to stay with it a long time. Once it’s established, John Fuh made a comparison with pouring cement. As long as the cement hasn’t hardened, you don’t take down the forms. Only when it’s hardened, then you can take the forms down. The forms here are the things that the mind does to keep itself in concentration. Once the concentration is solid, then the keeping requires a lot less. As you practice, you find bit by bit that this particular way of herding the mind in, or that particular way of herding the mind in, becomes less and less necessary. It’s like any kind of practice. The whole purpose of practice, whether it’s music or working with any other kind of skill, is to see what you’re doing inefficiently. So you can do the same thing, expending less energy. That gives you greater and greater insight into what it is that you are actually doing. Once you’re solid in the concentration, then you look at where there’s still stress, where there’s still any disturbance in that state. You see the disturbances in what you’re doing. When things are settled enough, then you can drop that and see what comes up in its place. This way, the concentration gets more and more subtle. It’s the same process that goes beyond just simply improving your concentration, but also leads to insight. Insight is what happens as you’re practicing concentration, as you’re working on the technique of your concentration. You simply notice things that you were doing that you didn’t notice before. Then you look at them in terms of stress, lack of stress, cause and effect, the Four Noble Truths. So it’s in working on the skill that insight comes. This is why no one else can do the work for anyone else. It’s our lack of skill that has us all tied up in knots, and it’s only through our own developing of the skill that we can untie those knots. So this is what’s meant by appropriate attention. This is the factor, more than anything else, that’s going to lead to discernment.

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