Testing Insights

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Chandli once compared meditating to walking. You have a left foot and you have a right foot, and they take turns stepping. The left foot is like concentration; the right foot is like discernment. You need them both all the way along. The concentration is the doing and the discernment is the watching and the evaluating. Just as in his instructions to Rahula, he said, “You have to evaluate what you’re doing all the time as you’re doing it, before, during, and after.” In the same way, you have to learn how to evaluate your concentration practice. First you do it and then you look at it, and then you do it some more and you look at it some more. In the same way that you step left and right, left, right, left, right. Some people have the idea that you do concentration and then you do discernment, as if you’re going to hop along on your left foot for a while and then hop along on your right foot for a while, which is a very strenuous way of walking, of trying to get anywhere. So you alternate. When you’re emphasizing the concentration, the emphasis is on settling down, finding a good, comfortable place to stay, and settling in there and staying there, not asking too many questions. Where is this going to go? Don’t ask. Just stay with it. Even then, there’s an element of discernment as you adjust, because getting the mind to a particular spot and then keeping it there are two different processes. They have some things in common, but some things are not. The trick, once you’ve discovered a good, comfortable place for the mind to stay, is to decide which things you have to keep on doing in order to keep it there, and how your desire to stay there doesn’t get in the way of actually staying there. So even in the process of getting the mind to be still and getting the mind to be concentrated, there has to be an element of discernment already. Then, once you’ve really settled in there, gotten to the point where you are skilled at getting the mind to stay there, getting the mind into that state, getting the mind to settle in, keep it there as long as you like while you’re sitting there. Then the next step is to keep it in that state whatever you’re doing, because that’s when you begin to see exactly how comfortable that state really is. In other words, a state may seem really comfortable for a while, but if you stick at it long enough, you may begin to see, “Oh, there is some discomfort here.” It’s as when you’re dealing with the breath. You have a certain way of conceiving the breath, and it helps you settle down. You can stay there for a while. But then if you drop it, you never really know how long that’s going to stay comfortable. When is it going to start showing signs of stress? In this way, you become a tourist meditator. You dip in a little bit, and you have a nice little tourist experience, and then you dip out. Then you come in again, and then you’re out again. You never gain the kind of understanding that comes from really living in a place. As if you stick with one way of dealing with the breath, you begin to see, “This is not comfortable always. There’s still an element of stress. Okay, what do you do next?” You learn to play with it. Make adjustments. Make adjustments in the breath. Make adjustments in the mind. This is precisely what you do with discernment on the larger sense. You need the continuity of concentration in order to see the subtleties of stress that are still there in the mind, even in very still states of mind. Without that continuity, they don’t show. Then when you start seeing them, the next question is, “What do you do next?” Why do you play with it? To see exactly where you’re causing stress in the mind. In the course of playing with the breath, you start gaining insights. This is a place where you have to be careful. Heedfulness is the beginning of wisdom. Remember that. That’s what enables you to learn how to rely on yourself in the practice, if you can train yourself to be heedful, watchful. One of the difficulties in teaching meditation is, on the one hand, you want to give as much information as you can to help people along the path, but you don’t want to give so much that people become dependent on the teacher for everything. You want them to learn how to evaluate things for themselves. In the course of evaluating the breath, you gain some insights, and then you’ve got to evaluate your insights. Especially when you gain insights that are based on concentration, they can be extremely convincing. When you’ve developed the kind of bullheadedness that’s needed to keep the mind on one object, then that bullheadedness becomes a problem. When you start gaining insights, you’re totally convinced of the truth of whatever insight you had. There was a monk one time who had been off meditating in the forest. He came to the realization that everything already is Dhamma, already as it is, and you shouldn’t touch it, you shouldn’t change it, you shouldn’t make any adjustments at all in the way the world is. That was his great Dhammic realization. He came back and was going to show the world that we ran into people in the world who were making changes. There were women who were wearing makeup, for one thing. This person was trying to change that. That person was trying to change this. He got really upset with these people for trying to change things. Of course, he wanted to change them. He didn’t reflect on himself. It was only after he came to see a Jon Fung, and Jon Fung very gently pointed this out to him, that he was able to let go. The lesson I learned there is that when you’re out there in the forest alone meditating and insights come, you’ve got to watch out, because things can be really true. You can gain true insights, but you can’t see them from only one side. I was struck when I read one of the passing comments in one of the Jon Lee’s Dhamma talks. He said, “When you’ve ever gained any insight, turn it inside out.” In other words, if your insight says A, then turn around and say, “Well, what would be the truth if you said not A? To exactly what extent would that be a useful insight?” Once you’ve explored A and not A, then you start looking at what are the assumptions that underline both A and not A. Can you learn how to question that assumption? This way you don’t get too one-sided an attitude towards your insights. Insights have their time and they have their place, but then there are times and places when they’re not appropriate. There’s a teaching on what are called the seven qualities of a person of integrity—having a sense of the Dhamma, having a sense of its meaning, having a sense of time and place. This is an aspect of wisdom—knowing when a particular insight applies and when it doesn’t apply. A good way of checking that is, as I said, following Jon Lee’s advice, once you’ve gained an insight and have a realization, turn it inside out. Turn it around. Look at the opposite of that particular insight. This way your insights don’t become an obstacle to deeper insight. You learn to look at them not as ultimate truths but as tools, which is what they are. Remember, insight is part of the path. It’s not the goal. So many people think that we’re here to gain particular insights and then we stop there. That’s not the case. You gain insights and then you put them to use for the sake of release. That’s the goal. So you have to look at everything in terms of cause and effect. You look at concentration. First learn how to do it and then notice what kind of effects it’s having on the mind. If it’s not having good effects, adjust your concentration. And, of course, if you adjust your concentration, you’re going to gain insights again. Look at the effect those insights have on your mind. See them as part of a causal process as well. See them as tools. Remember, some tools work fine in some situations and others work well in other situations. You don’t go around with just a hammer in your hand all the time. You hold the hammer for when you need to hit a nail. Then you put it down. You pick up a screwdriver when you need to screw on a screw. Then you put that down. In other words, you don’t have to go lugging your insights around. If they’re really useful, they’ll be there. Your powers of concentration will keep the mind still enough and open enough so that all the little nooks and crannies where those insights got placed are open. And when you need the insight, it’ll come to you because you’ve got the mind still. So if you want to become a self-reliant meditator, one is to learn how to depend on yourself to get the mind still, and the second one is to learn how to depend on yourself to test your insights. One of the things I find so amazing about Ajahn Munn is that he went out in the forest and practiced for years and years and years. There are so many people who go out alone in the forest and get kind of weird, but he didn’t. He gained awakening. It’s because he was such a relentless examiner of what was going on in his mind. He wouldn’t accept anything unless he’d really put it to the test. And he made himself the sort of person who was qualified to put things to the test, too, through developing his powers of concentration, his alertness, his own honesty. So as meditators, this is what we need to work on. We can’t go around depending on books, depending on teachers to do everything for us. We have to become the kind of people who can test things for ourselves. Developing a lot of qualities, such as heedfulness. Like we chanted just now, respect for concentration, respect for heedfulness. Realizing that your actions are important, and you have to be very careful because it’s so easy to slip off in the wrong direction. I spent a lot of time with the Chan Phuong, and one of the things I really appreciated in the training that he gave me was that he really did work on making me self-reliant. But the beginning of that was to strip down all of my conceit that I’d carried in from the outside world, and then to replace it with a sense of confidence that comes from being really relentless in your honesty, being really relentless in your heedfulness, checking things again and again and again. Not being willing to take anything for granted. So I started out his training confident in one way, and I came out of his training confident in a very different way. The second way was a lot more solid, because it involved testing things, but also training myself to be the sort of person who is qualified to test things. That takes work. It takes vigilance. But these are qualities we can all develop. That’s why there are passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about ways of testing yourself, ways of testing teachers, ways of testing teachings. These are the heart of the Dhamma. These are the heart of the practice. Of course, this willingness to test things is what gives rise to insight, and the insights can have to be tested to the point where they really do give rise to release. Then you know you’ve got what you’re looking for. It’s not simply a matter of faith. It’s a matter of having tested yourself all the way to release.

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