Catch It in the Act

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What are the basic principles? The Buddhist teaching is the principle that discernment nurtured by concentration has great benefits, great rewards. We hear that and we think, “Well, I have to get a lot of concentration, and only then can I work on discernment or wisdom.” But that’s not the case. All the basic elements of the path—virtue, concentration, and discernment—are things you already have to some extent. So if your virtue is weak, you can develop some concentration, not as good concentration as when your virtue is strong. Then you can develop some wisdom when your concentration is weak, still not as good as it can be when the concentration is strong, but it’s still there and you still need to use it. You can’t wait to get really good concentration in order to develop insight and discernment. Because things are happening all the time. The mind is constantly creating suffering through its unskillful ideas, its unskillful notions, and you’ve got to stop it to whatever extent you can. You have to catch it in the act. It’s like a dog using your front lawn as a bathroom. If you throw a rock at it after it’s done its business, it’s going to keep coming back. If you throw a rock at it and hit it right while it’s doing its business, it won’t do it again. It’s the same with the mind. If you catch it in the act of creating stress and suffering for itself, you can see that it’s not necessary. It doesn’t have to do that. It’s going to stop. If you catch it only afterwards, it’ll come back and go to the bathroom on you again. This is why you need concentration in order to catch the mind in the act. So to whatever extent you can, develop mindfulness and alertness and concentration. It’s all for the good. Put it to use as much as you can. It may be that the insights you gain are crude and will ultimately be replaced by more refined and more precise insights, but at least make use of what you’ve got. It’s like exercising your body. If you’ve got a weak body, you’d like it to be strong. You don’t sit around and wait for it to get strong and then go down to the gym. You go down to the gym, take the weak body you’ve got, and you exercise it. And by exercising it, it develops strength. The same with the concentration, the same with the discernment. You exercise what you’ve got. You put to use what you’ve got. And the more you put it to use, the stronger it grows. If it’s just something you work on while you’re sitting there, sitting here with your eyes closed, it’s not going to be nearly as strong as it would be if you actually put it to use in the course of the day. Sometimes it’s in your daily activities that you can catch sight of the mind creating suffering, especially when you’re talking to people or dealing with other situations. Part of you is still quiet and able to watch what’s going on in the mind. You say, “Oh, I do this. I think that way. I speak this way.” And it causes stress and suffering. And part of the mind will say, “Well, I have to do it that way. That’s the way it’s got to be done.” But when you can learn to question that, then you’re going to see the results of developing discernment. You’re going to see the rewards and the benefits of developing discernment. There tend to be two attitudes towards insights that you gain. One is that you gain the insight and you try to carry it around with you. But you have to remind yourself that it’s the state of concentration and that questioning of what you’re doing that’s what produces the insights. And the insights are appropriate for that occasion. So instead of filling your mental notebook with all kinds of insights, you try to keep recreating that state of mind that gives rise to the insights. It’s like the goose with the golden egg, like most gold in fairy tales. If you try to keep the golden egg for long periods of time, it turns into coal or ashes or feathers. But what you do is you keep the goose healthy. The goose keeps giving you golden eggs, and you use them right then and there. Because if you wait for insights that are more general in nature, it’s like throwing a rock at the dog long after it’s gone to the bathroom in your yard, and it’s not going to connect its desire to go to the bathroom with the rock. So it’s going to come back and defecate on your yard all over again. So try to keep the mind still. It’s like hiding out in the bushes. And then when the dog comes, you’ve got the rocks ready to throw at it. This is why the Buddha divides insight into three types, or understanding, into three types of understanding. There’s the understanding you gain from listening and reading, and the understanding that comes from thinking. These are useful things. It helps straighten out your views. It helps remind you that the big problem in life is not what other people are doing, it’s what you are doing. It’s how you think. It’s how you understand things, and particularly how you are alert to what you’re actually doing. But listening to that and thinking it through to the point where it seems to make sense, it’s helpful. But it’s not quite the same as putting the mind in a position where it can actually produce the insights it needs when it needs them. That’s what you do by developing your mindfulness, your alertness, your powers of concentration. It helps to get the mind out of its ordinary, normal discussion, its inner dialogue. Dialogue is hardly the word. All the clamoring that’s going on inside, getting the mind with the breath, putting your awareness with at least a still spot someplace in the body. So it’s not carried away by the drift of the discussion. And then you watch from that still point. It may not be a very long still point, but hey, you work with what you’ve got. And every now and then you catch yourself acting on greed, acting on anger, acting on fear, acting on unskillful motivations. And you see that it’s causing stress. That’s when insight really does have an impact on the mind, really does make a change in the mind. It makes a change in your habits. You get the dog right at the right spot and it will never come back to defecate in that particular spot ever again. But there’s not only one dog in your mind that you have to deal with. There are lots of dogs, so you’re going to have to have lots of rocks and you’re going to have to be very, very still. I don’t know how far this analogy can go, but you get the basic idea. The more powerful your concentration, the more refined the defilements you’ll be able to see. And you’ll be able to see very clearly the connection between what you do and the stress that it causes. But you can get the basic principle going even on very basic levels of concentration. Once you see that connection between a still spot in the mind and your ability to catch the mind in the act, you actually do change your habits. That’s what you understand is the third level of discernment, which is discernment that comes from developing the mind, developing the good qualities of the mind, like mindfulness and alertness. It’s simply a matter of strengthening the causes, and the results get more and more powerful. This is how you take the meditation into your day. Don’t understand meditation simply as sitting here with your eyes closed. It’s a habit that you develop of recognizing at least a still spot someplace in your mind and learning how to stay there, to watch, to catch the mind in action as it’s slipping out to cause itself trouble. Luang Por Dung once said that the cause of stress and suffering is the mind going out to its objects. When at least part of your mind is still, you can see the other parts going out, and then you can see the mischief that they do. You can see the mess that they make. And you get quicker and quicker at noticing when there is that impulse to go out. You see why it goes out, what it’s looking for, what prompts it. That way you can keep cutting away, cutting away, cutting away the mind’s unskillful habits until ultimately there are no unskillful habits to cut away. You’ve got them all. None of the dogs in town will ever come back to your yard.

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