Seeing Distinctions

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We try to bring the mind to stillness for two purposes. And the purposes go together. One is because when the mind is still, there’s a sense of ease and well-being. The second is that when it’s still, it can see things clearly. And these go together because if you don’t have a basic sense of well-being as you meditate and you see certain things about what you’ve been doing that cause suffering, you’re often unwilling to stop that old behavior, the idea that you’ve been doing something wrong and you have to change your ways, it’s exasperating, it’s irritating, it feels burdensome. So we have to soften up the mind to get it in a good mood. In other words, allow it to breathe in a way that feels good. So that being in the present moment is a comfortable experience. You want to stay here more and more. You feel more and more inclined to stay here. And the more steady you are in staying here, the more you can see. What are you looking to see? Primarily, you want to see your intentions. Sometimes we’re told we have to see things in terms of their being constant, stressful, and not self. But you have to put that in a larger context. If you see that something is inconstant but you don’t see anything better, you say, “Well, I’m still going to hang on because this is as good as it gets.” It’s only when you see things are better that you’re willing to let go. In other words, you see that you’ve been holding on to something and you’re finding happiness in something that’s not really worth the effort. And there’s a better happiness, a higher happiness, a happiness that goes deeper, that comes from letting go. When the mind sees this, it doesn’t have to be forced to let go. It’ll let go on its own. So you can’t just tell it to let go. You have to show it that, one, you’ve been attached to something, and two, it’s not worth the attachment, and three, you’ve got a better alternative. So how do we learn about intentions? And why are they so important? Well, intention, of course, is karma. It’s what shapes our present moment. Intentions from the past, intentions in the present. So we focus the mind on holding to one intention. The best way to get to know intentions is to try to keep one going. And you’ll see all the other intentions that come in try to knock it off, knock it off course. Otherwise it’s like floating down a river and two different rivers converge, and you don’t know which current you’re on, whether you’re on the current of the original river or the current of the second river, because everything is just flowing. But if you set up one marker, “I’m going to stay right here,” then you’ll begin to see, is the water flowing from the direction of the first river or is it flowing from the direction of the second? You make up your mind to stay with the breath. Any intention that pulls you off the breath is something you don’t want right now. Those other intentions will have their blanishments, they’ll have their attractions. For the time being, you have to learn how to say no. This requires mindfulness, it requires discernment, and it also requires understanding, the understanding that you can say no to these things. And that you can watch the mind as it’s beginning to wander off. For many people, this is a totally new idea. For most of them, you’re staying with the breath, and all of a sudden you don’t know what happened, and you’re way off on the other side of the world. Then other thoughts seem to come out of nowhere, and you’re even aware of the fact that you can’t. And you may think that you can’t, that it’s an impossibility, the mind is just that way. But it doesn’t have to be that way. There are stages in the process of the mind’s switching from one object to another. And the more observant you are, the more you see these things. And you begin to realize there are points in the process where you can say no, you don’t have to go. You see that there was an intention and it was buried under a lot of other stuff, but the intention was there to shift. And so it’s only by setting up one intention and sticking with it that you’re going to notice those other little intentions. And the more you can say no to them, the more quickly you can sense them, the more you see what’s going on in the mind. You begin to see that there are other things that go along with the intention. There’s attention, your sense of what’s important to pay attention to and what’s not. There are perceptions, the labels you put on things. And there are feelings—pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain. All of these shape our intentions, and all of these are things you need to get to know. The more distinctly you can see them, the better. This is an important quality of discernment, is seeing distinctions. This is the opposite of what we’re sometimes told, which is that discernment sees the oneness of all things. But that’s not what the Buddha taught. He taught that you have to see distinctions. This is one of the reasons why he has you focus on arising and passing away. Not simply to see that things do arise and pass away, but lots of different things that tend to glom together are actually arising and passing away at different points. A feeling arises, and then a perception arises on top of that. They’re two separate things. We tend to glom them together. But if you want to free yourself from suffering, you’ve got to see that they are distinct. And then there may be an intention that’s built on top of that perception. Again, you want to see that as something distinct. And then there’s the whole issue of feeling. There’s an intentional element in all of our feelings. There are perceptions that are related to our feelings. There are acts of attention that are related to our feelings. And you want to be able to tease these out. This is one of the reasons why the Buddha has you focus on suffering or stress as the main point of discernment. Four Noble Truths start here, because this is where everything comes together. We have lots of perceptions surrounding our pains. Many of them go back to the days before we even knew language. That’s why a lot of those perceptions are pretty strange. We may have the feeling that the pain is coming at us and we’ve got to do something to catch it so it doesn’t go deeper into us. So we’re always there catching pain, catching pain, catching pain. But there’s another way of looking at it, to realize that when pains come and go, they come and go very quickly. This is why it’s so important that, say, if there’s a pain in your body, you learn how to see the distinction between the actual feelings of pleasure and pain and the other sensations of the four elements, i.e., the motion of wind, the solidity of earth, the liquidity of water, and the warmth of the fire element. If you glom everything together, then the permanence of the solidity of the earth element seems to apply to the permanence of the pain as well. And you miss the fact that the pain sensations are coming and going, flitting around very quickly, even though they may come back to the same place again and again and again. There are moments of pain. But if you learn to make the distinction that the solidity is one thing and the pain is something else, you begin to see that the pain is rising, passing away, rising, passing away very quickly. So you have to be able to perceive this distinction. Once you perceive it, then you can look at the arising and passing away from another angle, seeing it as not so much something coming at you, but as something going away, going away. Focus on the passing away. As soon as you’re aware of the pain, as the Buddha says, as soon as you’re aware of something, it’s already turned into something else. So as soon as you’re aware of each little moment of pain, think of it as passing away from you. You don’t have to catch it, you don’t have to do anything to prevent it. You’re just watching it as it’s passing away on its own. It gives you a totally different relationship to the pain. And even with that one shift in perception, you’re relieving a lot of the pain, a lot of the burdensomeness that we tend to associate with pain. So this is why seeing distinctions is so important. If you clom everything together, you would never notice that. So insight meditation is not simply a matter of noting or scanning. You have to ask questions. This is a function of attention, one of the elements that helps to clear up the intentions you have in the present moment. Ask the questions that help you see where there is an intentional element in your pain that’s affected by the way you perceive pain. You perceive things by the way you label things, by the way you focus on things. Because it’s only when you see the contribution of the intention, that’s when you realize that there’s something to let go, i.e., you let go of that particular intention. Because your intention was that you wanted to get some happiness out of whatever it was you were experiencing, and you didn’t have that happiness to offer. You were putting an effort into perceiving things in a certain way and holding on to things in a certain way, and the effort wasn’t really being rewarded. That’s when insight into inconstancy and stress and not-selfness, i.e., the things that are not really under your control, really goes deep and really affects a change in your behavior. And when you can see that you have the alternative to holding on in that way, that’s how you let go. So all these factors come together, the factors of name and dependent-core arising, attention, intention, perception, feeling, contact within the mind. Your ability to tease them out allows you to see where the problem is and how you can solve it, particularly that problem that you have. The problem is the craving that goes along with the intention that wants to get a certain happiness out of things, a happiness that they can’t provide. And when you see that you have an alternative to that way of relating to things and that there’s less suffering involved, you let go. No problem. And it really is a genuine letting go, and it’s an important letting go. Because when you’ve seen clearly that this is the way you’ve been creating suffering for yourself, you don’t want to go back to that kind of behavior at all. You’ve learned a new skill, a new approach. So this is why we try to make the mind still, so we can see these things. And it’s also in the shape that once it sees these things, it’s going to let go. It’s willing to make whatever changes in behavior are required. So to try to keep this in mind, we’re bringing the mind to a state of oneness so that we can see the genuine distinctions that are there. We tend to come into meditation with lots of false ideas about what’s happening in the mind, what the different forces in the mind are, how they work. So we’ve got to bring everything to one first, and then when they’re brought to one, they will fall out on their own in the way they actually arise and pass away, as opposed to the way we thought they were arising and passing away. So the oneness is important. It’s the oneness of concentration, the singleness of preoccupation that starts with the first jhana, and then the total unification of the mind that starts with the second jhana. In John Lee’s images of taking a rock, there are different kinds of ore. You put the one rock into the smelter, and then you apply heat. And when different temperatures are reached, different ores are going to melt out. The gold melts out at one temperature, the silver at another one, the lead at another one. They separate on their own, without you having to go and take a pick or pickaxe and try to get the little tiny bits of ore. When you get things really still and really together in the mind, then things will start separating out if you’re very careful to watch in the right place with the right framework. This is why the Buddha gives you the framework of the Four Noble Truths. That’s what you’re using to watch things with. When you look from that angle, then they separate out on their own. So discernment is a matter of seeing distinctions that build on the oneness of concentration. Keep this in the back of your mind as you meditate, that you’re trying to bring things to oneness. Not because the oneness is, in and of itself, the end. It’s a means to a goal of seeing distinctions. And when you see those distinctions from the right light, they put an end to suffering. So watch carefully. 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