Circumspection

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who had been born in another country and came to the United States when she was, I guess, in her teens. Her English is very good. What I’ve noticed occasionally when talking to her is that I stumble across a word that she doesn’t know or she hasn’t encountered. And it tells you a lot. A lot about American society. To hear an immigrant say, “What’s that word? Never heard it used.” In this case, the other day, the word was “circumspection.” I mentioned she had to be circumspect in her practice. She said, “What’s that? Never heard it.” That’s an indication that circumspection is a word that we need more of. Not just the word, of course. We need more of that quality in our society, in our lives, in our minds. It’s especially a problem in the meditation when you find that you’ve solved a particular problem. You say, “Here’s the solution to everything. This is the key that’s going to unlock all those other problems in my meditation.” And you find that it works for a couple of days. And then it doesn’t work anymore. Then you throw away the key, and you try another key, and another one, and another one, until you get something that works. And then you’re going to use that key. You’ve got to realize there’s no one quality, no one technique, no one strategy that’s going to cover everything. You need to learn how to read your own mind to see what’s needed. This is not simply a question of using skillful means as opposed to unskillful means. There are many different skillful means, but the question then is which skillful means is appropriate right now, and how far should you use it. Sometimes it’s merely a question of balance, like that image of holding the baby chick in your hand. If you squeeze it too tight, it’s going to die. If you squeeze it too loosely, it’s going to fly away. You’ve got to find just the right amount of pressure. And then there’s finding balance among the factors for awakening, the ones that are energizing, like analysis of qualities—that’s the wisdom or discernment faculty—persistence, and rapture. These things energize you. Then there are the calming factors, like serenity, concentration, equanimity. And you’ve got to figure out which one you need right now. And so how do you figure that out? You watch. You try things out and you see what works and what doesn’t work. And you begin to gain a sense of how to read the mind. This principle applies all across the board, throughout the practice. Every one of the perfections, all the meritorious activities, have their limits. For example, with generosity, you have the ability and the courage to be generous, but you don’t want to be generous to a fault. The Buddha said a person of integrity doesn’t give in a way that adversely affects him or herself or the recipient. In other words, you don’t give so much that it harms you. You have to figure out how much is appropriate. You even have a rule about this in the monk’s rules, what they call a family and training. A family is someone who’s newly introduced to the Dhamma, is really enthusiastic, and they’re giving so much that it’s really harming the family. So the monks are told not to go to their house. So it’s not good to put too much pressure on them until they seem to have gained a sense of just right or what’s enough for them. There’s the issue of the precepts. We’re told to be truthful, but how truthful is truthful? As the Buddha said, there are times when you know that if you say the truth about a certain matter, it’s going to give rise to greed or aversion or delusion, in which case you don’t talk about it. It doesn’t mean that you lie about it. You find ways of not talking about it, changing the subject. There are other ways of avoiding the issue. There are cases where the actor and the soldier come to see the Buddha. They talk about how they’ve been promised by their teachers that through their acting and through their soldiering, they’re going to go to heaven. What does the Buddha say about this? He tries to avoid the question. It’s only when they keep pressing him that he finally answers, because he knows the answer is going to get them upset. Then there’s the practice of goodwill. We want to have goodwill for all beings. We develop that quality as a standard part of our practice. Every day, every day, may all beings be happy. May all beings be free from oppression. We work on our attitude to make sure that we really do sincerely feel that. Not that you have to love all beings, but you wish them well. There are a lot of people out there who are hard to love for one reason or another, but you want to make sure you don’t wish them ill. You work on that attitude and try to spread it around to everybody. But then this runs up against the teachings about knowing who to love and who not to love. The Pali word here is sevana. These are the people you partake. And there are some people that are good to partake. You learn good things from them. You try to associate with people who have conviction, people who are generous, people who are virtuous, people who are wise and discerning. Those are the people you want to hang out with. Those are the people you want to open up to and talk about what’s in your heart. But as for people who don’t fit, who don’t meet those standards, you’ve got to be very careful about how open you are with them. So you have to balance your goodwill with discernment. You have to be circumspect. Otherwise, you start opening yourself up to all sorts of influences, all sorts of ideas, and you don’t know what to think. So you have to learn how to balance. Be circumspect in the way you develop your generosity, the way you develop your virtue, the way you develop your attitude of goodwill. We’re not here to connect with everybody. That’s an idea that has its roots back in European Romanticism. They were suffering because we don’t connect with all our fellow humanity. There are some people you don’t want to connect with because they have a bad influence on you. It’s not that you’re passing judgment on them forever, but you use your judgment. You use your circumspection to see which friendships are actually having a good impact on you and which ones are not. So you have to use your discernment in everything, all aspects of the practice. Be circumspect. After all, this is the middle way that we’re practicing. Sometimes it’s simply a matter of balancing between extremes, but also it’s learning how to combine different qualities that seem to conflict. The mind is a complex thing. The needs of the mind in training are complex, and this is not a one-fold path. Even the practice of exercising your discernment, as the Buddha says in his comments about the factors for awakening, the analysis of qualities, which is the discernment faculty, sometimes, if you use that too much, it gets the mind scattered. If you’re trying to figure things out and you just cannot figure them out, maybe it’s time to let the mind rest. So you have to use circumspection even in your discernment, in your application of discernment. Develop a sense of “just right” in all your dealings. And don’t be afraid of using your powers of judgment—judgment if it’s harsh, unthinking, too quick to really read the situation, because that’s being judgmental. But you want to be judicious. You want to use your powers of judgment to gain this sense of circumspection. And as you try to manage your meditation, keep it on track. Remind yourself there’s no one silver bullet that’s going to do everything for you. But just because one of the bullets doesn’t do everything for you doesn’t mean that it’s useless. Don’t throw them away. Keep them in your collection. So you have just the right bullet to shoot down whatever defilement is in the way, whatever problem is in the way. And in doing this, you develop your powers of discernment, so they really are circumspect and all-around. That’s what circumspection means. You look all around. There’s a big difference between the two. As the Buddha once said, it’s not that he praises all practices or condemns all practices. He doesn’t praise every form of renunciation. He doesn’t condemn every form of renunciation. He would praise the practices that would lead to fewer defilements and condemn the ones that don’t. The test, of course, is when you apply a particular strategy or apply a particular tactic, what are the results? You’re realizing that you have to look at the results from many different angles. Ajaan Mahaprabhu once said that this was one of the lessons he had to learn from Ajaan Maan, that he himself was a sort who would tend to go off on one tangent. And Ajaan Maan would have to remind him, “Well, there are other things to think about.” Look all around you as you practice to make sure you’re not going off on one extreme. This is how we get on the Middle Way, by looking to the left and the right, and forward and back, to make sure we’re on track.

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