Circumspection

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I was reading about a program where they interviewed students who had had to drop out of a surgery training unit. The interviewers kept saying over and over again that they were aghast as they heard some of these people describing surgeries they had attempted and telling what they had done. And that really Realizing that there was a huge problem with what they had done, they simply thought, “Well, that’s the way things had to be.” There was no ability to recognize a problem, much less to solve it. This is one of the important skills we have to develop as meditators, is recognizing when we have problems. And recognizing when we don’t. Sometimes people come with questions and all you need to do is use a little bit of common sense and you can solve the questions. Other times, they don’t ask questions and it takes a long time before you realize they’ve got a real problem. This is why one of the basic lessons that the forest dhajans always try to teach is learning to recognize a problem and learning how to try to figure things out on your own. It’s like if they hand you everything on a platter, you’re never going to learn how to fix your own food. And if all you get is good food, you never recognize, “Okay, doing this gives bad food, doing that gives good food.” This is why there’s no one forest tradition method. There’s no particular way of doing vipassana. You do it this way and you take the instructions and you follow through the instructions, and that’s all you have to do. But there’s nothing like that in the forest tradition. The closest we have is the John Lee’s instructions on how to do breath meditation. And even there, there’s lots of room for variation. The point being that you’ve got to figure out which changes you might make on the basic levels are actually useful changes and which ones are going to get in the way. And you have to learn how to read the results. This quality is called vimamsa in Pali. It’s one of the bases of success. That’s how you’ve succeeded in any endeavor. You’re going to learn a skill. You have to learn when it’s done skillfully, it’s like this; when it’s done not skillfully, it’s like that. And when you find yourself doing things in an unskillful way, what are you going to change? You have to figure out cause and effect. You have to turn around and look at what you’re doing. John Lee’s analogy is learning how to weave a basket. The teacher gives you the basic instructions on how to weave different patterns that you might be able to weave in the basket, but then it’s up to you to do it carefully. It’s up to you to do it with a sense of symmetry, with a sense of right proportions. And the teacher can tell you, “Well, that’s not quite right,” or “That’s very much not right.” He might give you some suggestions on how to change, but you have to be observant about what you’re doing. Where in the process of weaving are you being careless? Where are you being inconsistent? When you observe that and you make changes, that’s how you develop skill as a weaver. It’s the same in meditation. You stay with the breath for a while in a particular way, you scan the body in a particular way, and then you have to ask yourself, “Are these good results or are they not?” One way of checking that is to try doing it in a different way for a while and see what results you get then, and then compare. One of my students, who’s a teacher of computer software, was telling me one time that he’d gotten a really bad, ugly piece of software code from one of his students. So he called the student into his office and asked, “Do you realize how ugly this is?” He actually showed it to a couple of his other fellow professors, and they all agreed it was one of the ugliest pieces of code they’d ever seen. So he asked the student, “Do you know how ugly this is?” And the student had no idea the difference between ugly and beautiful code. So the professor sat him down and showed him, “Okay, this is how you do this in an elegant way.” And just having something to compare made all the difference for that student. Unfortunately, I can’t sit you down and say, “Okay, when the mind is quiet, it’s like this, and when the mind is not quiet, it’s like that. Good breathing is like this, bad breathing is like that.” But you can learn how to make the comparisons for yourself. That way, you develop your powers of observation. And the texts give you a vocabulary to help with this process. I described the factors that Ajahn Lee gives you all those steps of breath meditation that you can try. And as Ajahn Fu said, if you’re doing something wrong in your meditation, you can check it against that list of seven steps. It’s kind of like a checklist for how concentration should be when you’re focusing on the breath. But even then, you have to work out the details. Sometimes when Ajahn Lee talks about spreading the breath in a particular way or going through the body in a particular way, it’s not quite right for how you experience your own breath energies. Well, you can try other ways of doing it. He himself would come up with different ways of conceiving the breath energies. In the book, he talks about letting the breath go down the spine. In one of his Dhamma talks, he talks about it coming up the spine. So you’ve got to learn how to experiment, learn how to evaluate the results of your experiments. And as you begin to realize there’s a range of ways that you can do this, you get a better sense of when things are going well and when they’re not. It’s in this way that concentration practice develops your discernment. Discernment is not just memorizing sabbe, like we chanted just now. Those are useful tests for what you’re doing, but you have to use them as tests and not simply as a kind of wisdom you’re going to clone. You test to see what you’re getting out of your concentration. Is something solid and constant? You test to see if it’s pleasant. You test to see if you’ve got things under your control. If not, there’s a problem. That’s one of the best ways of using those three perceptions. It’s learning how to recognize when you’ve got a problem, when something further needs to be done. All of this grows from that basic principle that the Buddha taught his son, Rahula. The very first lesson Rahula got from him was a lesson in how to meditate, i.e., look at your actions, look at the results. If you can see that there was some way that you caused harm, talk it over with someone else. Resolve not to repeat that mistake. Try something new. Try something different. These instructions then go into the heart. When the Buddha talks about seeing where there’s disturbance in your concentration, it’s basically the same lesson, just carried to a different level of refinement. But again, you’ve got to get sensitive to where there is disturbance, where there is a subtle level of up and down in the stress. That’s your signal that there’s something wrong, something needs to be dealt with. So this quality of vimamsa, which can be translated as circumspection, analysis, ingenuity—in other words, the active part of your mind. As you apply it to concentration, that’s how you develop the discernment that’s going to liberate the mind from all of its unskillful habits. It’s a matter of developing your own sensitivity to your actions and the results, and developing higher standards as to what counts as a good result. You always want to be raising the bar. As the Buddha said, it was because he didn’t rest completely. He was content with his attainments that he was able to reach awakening. Again, you have to learn how to use that teaching skillfully. If you just keep pushing, pushing, pushing all the time, you’re not going to have the chance to settle in and get to know a state of concentration well enough to develop your own sensitivity around it. So again, you’ve got to learn how to read the mind and figure out what it needs at any particular time. This is another reason why there’s no single-force tradition meditation method, because there are times when you have to focus very strongly in a very one-pointed way and other times when you have to focus in a broader way. There are times when the mind needs uplifting. There are times when it needs to be reined in. There are lots of different things that you need to learn how to do with the mind. It’s like developing any skill. If you’re going to be a carpenter, you can’t just learn how to saw wood and just stop there. There are lots of different skills, so you can actually build something that’s of use, that’s going to last, and can be a thing of beauty. So as you do the meditation, try to learn one of the times to appreciate and observe and evaluate, and one of the times simply just to stay with your object without thinking too much about it, but keeping your concentration still. The mind has its rhythms, and you have to learn when following the rhythm is going to be helpful and times when you have to say, “Well, I have to go a little bit against things just to test them.” So you get a more and more subtle sense of cause and effect, and this really does become a skill. You’re a skill. We’re practicing the Dhamma so we can straighten out ourselves. That means adjusting the principles of the Dhamma so that you can actually effectively straighten out yourself. Not that you change your mind. Not changing the principles, but learning how to apply them to the particulars of your particular problems. That’s where the practice becomes your own.

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