Levels of Discernment

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There’s part of your mind that wants to meditate and part that doesn’t. So do what you can to strengthen the first and weaken the second. As John Suwa would always say, start with an attitude of confidence, an attitude of conviction that what we’re doing here is important. It’s one of the most important things you can do in life, because the mind, after all, is what shapes your life. And if the mind itself is poorly shaped, the experiences you’re going to have are all going to be misshapen too. So look what you’ve got here. You’ve got the mind aware, to some extent, in the present moment, and you’ve also got some thoughts wandering off here. Try to bring everything back. Really emphasize the sensation of your body sitting right here. Where are your hands right now? Work up your arms, work up your shoulders. Then start with your feet, and work up the legs, through the hips, the back, up through the neck and the head. You may notice there are certain parts of the body that tend to do the work of your thinking. Be especially careful to breathe as much breath energy through those parts to sort of short-circuit the process so that before a thought has a chance to form, you’ve cut it off. And the mind will then complain, “What’s going on here? What can I think about?” Try to think about doing this, being fully engaged in the present moment. And again, little thoughts will come off, but you just let them go. You can stay right here, right here, right here. Why? Because you want to see the mind in action. And to see that, you need to get as still as possible. And so if nothing’s happening, remind yourself that you’re doing the preparatory groundwork. Without this, you can read everything in the texts. Work out what makes sense, what doesn’t make sense. But it’s still words. It’s still concepts. The Buddha talks about three levels of discernment. There’s the discernment that comes from listening, and that includes reading. There’s the discernment that comes from thinking. And then there’s the discernment that comes from developing. The word bhavana, usually translated as meditation, can also mean just to develop. You can read about mindfulness, but it’s very different from actually developing mindfulness. Figure out exactly what’s the Buddha talking about when he talks about mindfulness, and when you can detect when it’s strong, when it’s weak, when it’s about to lapse. You learn a lot more about it that way. One of the examples the Ajahns give is the difference between learning about military science and actually going into a battle. Or it’s the difference between reading about swimming and actually getting in the pool and swimming around. When you do the exercises, that’s when you learn the reality of these things. And in some cases, it’ll correspond to what you thought about. In other cases, it’s going to have some interesting twists and turns that you wouldn’t have expected if you hadn’t actually sat down to do it. So simply get the mind to settle down teaches you a lot about the mind. And then once it’s settled down, you can see more clearly when there’s going to be a stirring of a thought, a stirring of an intention, what it’s coming from, where it’s going. And that way you get a lot more control over your own mind. But it’s important that you know what to look for. As we were saying this afternoon, the difference between what the Buddha teaches about meditation and what other teachers teach about meditation lies in the questions you ask. Because it is possible to get the mind to settle down, and other teachers outside of Buddhism teach how to get the mind to settle down. But then the issue is, what questions do you ask? If you’re trying to find God, you get a little bit of light or a little friendly buzz inside and you think you’ve found God, well, that’s it. Or if you’re getting a state of spaciousness where you think you’ve reached the ground of being, that’s what you’re looking for. You can identify a state of concentration as that, and that’s as far as you get. But if, when the mind settles down, you ask the question, “Where’s the stress here? What am I doing to contribute to that? When the stress goes up, what have I done? When the stress goes down, what did I do?” You try to catch the connection. You see yourself doing things you hadn’t expected or things that part of you knew in a kind of obscure way that you were doing, but you didn’t see them clearly. And you didn’t see that they were optional. In other words, you don’t have to do them. When you can see that, you can let go. And then you just keep chipping away, chipping away until you find the goal down in here. So again, this is not anything you can learn from books. You can learn about it from books. But you don’t actually get the goal unless you actually do the meditation. On the one hand, it might be heartwarming to know that there’s gold under your house, but if you don’t dig down and find the gold, then you can’t use it to pay off the bills. So we’re digging down inside to find the gold. We’ll find some genuine gold, and we’ll find other things in the meantime. As Ajahn Lee points out, the body of ours is like a mountain. It has all kinds of good things, if you know how to use them. You can use the dirt, and you know how to use that. You can get the trees, if you know how to use them. But what we’re really looking for is the treasures that lie deeper inside. But you can’t go straight for the treasures. You’ve also got to learn how to get the mind in a position where it can see things clearly. So the concentration is the beginning. But you don’t want to rush through it. You want to learn how to stay right here, right here, so you can really get to know the territory well. And once you gain the knowledge on this level, then you’ll be able to move forward. This really makes a difference in how you live your life, how you experience things, the amount to which you place stress on yourself, and the amount to which you’re able to lift that burden. Because the more stress you lay yourself down with, the less you’ll be able to do anything for anybody else. I get a chance to talk sometimes over the phone with people who are really heavily burdened. They have all kinds of unnecessary thinking, and of course it makes them incapable of doing anything but just struggling to live with themselves. So working on yourself is not a selfish activity. In fact, when you come down to it, this is the best thing you can do for anybody. When you’re not a burden on yourself, you’re not a burden on other people. And the extent to which you can help other people, from that point on, becomes a gift. The Buddha doesn’t talk about obligations to other people aside from our obligations to our parents and to our teachers. Teachers have obligations to their students. Those are the only obligations he talks about. But he does point out that this is the nature of karma. You’ve got to start with your own mind, because that’s where the trouble is coming from. And in the course of trying to work on your mind, you’re being harmful to other people. It’s not going to work. So this development of concentration, development of discernment, is based on virtue. It’s based on generosity. But again, we view these things as part of our training. We view these things as our gift, both to ourselves and to others. The Buddha was not a God saying, “You have to do this, you have to do that, because I created you.” He’s saying, “This is the way things work. And if you want to find true happiness, you have to learn how to pull the lever as well.” Learn which levers to pull, which ones to not pull. And he leaves the choice of how to handle all this up to us. How seriously do you want to be happy? That’s something you have to decide yourself. The Buddha doesn’t force anything on anyone. But the way things are, in terms of cause and effect, is what applies the force. The fact that the mind is sensitive both to pleasure and pain applies force. If you’re willing to listen to what you’ve got here, listen to what’s going on, and observe what’s going on. And try to be discerning in your choice of what’s the best way to live. It takes some discernment to practice, to choose this path. And in the course of following the path, your discernment grows. So the discernment that comes from listening and reading is helpful. It helps you see the virtue of the path. But you don’t want to stop there. You want to try things out. Shape the mind here in the present moment. Shape the mind around the breath. Shape the mind into the body. Shape it so that it’s not so hungry for things outside all the time, not so hungry for a thinking process. Learn to be content with just being right here as a foundation for seeing what’s right here. That will enable you to develop greater and greater levels of skill.

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