Ordain Your Heart

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A very popular concept in the forest tradition is that of ordaining your heart. This applies to two kinds of people. One, monks and nuns who’ve already ordained their bodies but whose attitudes haven’t gotten yet in line with the Dhamma. And the other is for laypeople. When you sit here meditating, focused on the breath in and of itself, ardent, alert, and mindful, putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, that’s ordaining your heart, at least temporarily. You put aside all your memories, all your anticipations about the world outside. The mind can let go of its responsibilities at home and at work, and it can look after itself, try to develop some good qualities inside so it can be its own refuge. It doesn’t have to keep leaning on the world all the time. And as with any temporary ordination, there are some people who regard this as a time to rest, gather their strength, and they leave it. They go back to the world. But that doesn’t give you the best benefits from concentration or meditation practice. The best benefits come when you actually try to carry it into the world. You sit here getting the mind in a nice, still condition, and all too often the question comes very quickly, after not that long a period of stillness, “Okay, what’s next?” And the answer is, “This is what’s next.” You’re trying to maintain this. This is part of right effort. You’ve got something good, you’ve got to maintain it so you can develop it. If you don’t maintain it, it’s just going to fall apart. And the more you try to push it, if you don’t push it in the right way, you just destroy what you’ve got. So learn how to be patient with the practice. Be patient with your meditation. Allow things to ripen in the mind. Then see to what extent you can carry the meditation into your daily life. In other words, have a sense of a center inside. Have a sense that whatever thoughts come up that would pull you away, you’re not going to be pulled away. Only if they’re related to things you really have to do will you allow yourself to think them. And then when you’ve thought them, you’re done with them, you put them aside, and you come back to the breath. See how long you can do that. What’s going to happen, of course, is that you find all kinds of things rushing into the mind. And the mind will have this tendency to want to rush out and join them. That’s what you have to question. And it’s here that concentration can give rise to discernment. My teacher had a lay student who had extremely strong powers of concentration. She was constantly complaining that she didn’t see how her concentration was giving rise to any discernment once, because she left concentration totally. When she was in it, she was in it totally. She thought that somehow just giving herself a certain amount of time every day to get the mind calm would calm down her anger. She had a very strong problem with anger. But the fact that the mind had become more concentrated and more focused actually meant that often her anger got stronger. This is because she wasn’t willing to maintain the concentration and observe it, and to observe what was pulling her out and learn how to question what was pulling her out. That phrase, “putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world,” that’s the protecting part of the meditation. When you notice that the mind is pulling out, your first instinct should be, “Don’t go.” Make it give you a reason before you go. Then examine the reasons. Sometimes the reasons are just a façade, and sometimes they’re pretty weak. But when the mind is ready to go, it’s ready to take anything as a reason. You have to learn to be a little bit more resistant. Try to see what is in there that wants to go. Why does it want to go? What does it get out of this? The Buddha lists as one of the ways of dealing with distraction is that you look at the drawbacks of the distraction. What would happen if you thought about that thought or kept thinking that thought for ten, ten minutes, twenty minutes, thirty minutes, hours? What would that do to you? But looking at the drawbacks is not enough. You also have to ask yourself, “Can you catch what it is that is the delicious taste that comes with going out after things? What’s the thrill? What’s the joy? What’s the pleasure that comes with going with those things?” That’s the payoff, and that’s what the mind is going for. And all too often it’s not willing to disclose that little hit to itself. And so you find it buried under all kinds of denial. Which is why you have to be really stubborn. Wherever the mind is tending to go, say, “Nope, I’m not going to go there.” Wait for it to give you reasons. If you’re stubborn enough and you stick with your resolve to stay with the concentration long enough, or at least to stay with your center long enough, you’ll find that it’ll finally fess up. This is what it was looking for. This is what it thought it was getting out of that kind of thinking. And when you can see how ridiculous it was, how it wasn’t really worth your time, that’s when you can let it go. That’s when it loses its appeal. Now, all too often our culture provides us with all kinds of excuses for distraction. And if we don’t learn to question them, we’re just going to keep following them again and again and again. Greed is healthy, they tell us. Lust is healthy. Good expression, getting your anger out, that’s healthy. So the idea of restraining the mind here is something that goes against our cultural values, which means we’ve got to learn how to question those values. What does our culture know? Especially what does it care about you? What does it want out of you? And what is it going to give you in return? We’ve gotten some education from our culture, but there’s a lot in modern culture that just wants to use us as a number, or as a consumer, or whatever. Is that the role we want to play? Or would we want something higher, something more valuable, something more lasting? So learn how to maintain what you’ve got, value what you’ve got. Don’t view the concentration simply as a stepping stone that you’re going to leave as soon as you can to get up to the more wonderful areas of discernment and wisdom. You don’t leave concentration. You use it. You learn how to discern things while you’re in concentration. Now, there are deeper stages of concentration where you can’t do much thinking, and there are more shallow ones where you can. And you learn how to use both. When you’re dealing with things outside, as you’re walking around, you can’t go into really deep concentration. But that shallow concentration where you’re with the breath and aware of things outside, not only aware but willing to engage them when you have to, but if there’s part of the mind that steps back and watches, that’s when a lot of discernment comes. John Suat was constantly saying that his best insights came during walking meditation. In fact, there’s a Dhamma talk where he says that his full awakening came during walking meditation. It’s now a little sign on a statue of him at Varasokara. His distinguishing characteristic was that he was walking while he gained full awakening. It’s a little bit reductive, but it does point to an important fact. It’s when the mind is not in the deepest concentration, but it’s in touch with its concentration as it’s moving around, dealing with the world. That’s where there’s a huge opportunity for discernment to arise. So we shouldn’t throw that away. And it comes from maintaining your concentration. It’s not the most glamorous work, but it’s the work that gets things done. You can’t demand, “You’re going to gain this insight or that insight, or things are going to progress at this particular rate.” Which is why it’s sometimes frustrating. Sometimes it takes a while for these things to reveal themselves. But if you create the conditions, a sense of a steady center inside, a sense of well-being that comes with that center, so you’re not just hungry for whatever comes up, then you can expect that things will come. And learning the patience that comes from maintaining the right causes, that in and of itself is an important strength of mind. Your willingness not to listen to the voices that say, “I’m bored,” or “I’m impatient,” or “I want things now.” Say, “Nope, not now.” That’s how to say “no” to a lot of the reasons that the mind will care for getting distracted. So we’re patient with things, not because we don’t care. We do care very much. But working with the mind requires a lot of patience. A lot of persistence. A lot of steadiness. None of which are very glamorous qualities, but they’re the ones that get the work done. And they’re the ones that allow wisdom and discernment to arise in unexpected places. There’s that story of the nun who was frustrated because her practice wasn’t going anywhere. She started thinking about all the people who do ordinary occupations, like people who plow the fields, people who cook, whatever. They get some satisfaction out of what they were doing. But she didn’t seem to be getting any satisfaction out of her practice. Then she realized that they get satisfaction because they just stick to their work. If they’re really good at their work, then they’re observant at the same time. So she very carefully washed her feet, went into her room. There was a lamp on, so she pulled the wick out with a pin. And in just being very patient and meticulous in what she was doing, maintaining her center of mind all the time, she gained an unexpected insight. It was so important that it constituted her awakening. So stick to your duties. Stay with the breath, no matter what tempts you to leave, no matter how important it may seem. If it’s not related to things you really have to do, let it go. Let it go. Stick with your work. There’s a story about the shackle and expedition. The last one that went to Antarctica, the ship got stuck on the ice. They had to leave the ship and carry their dinghies behind them. They got to where the water began to open up among the ice floes, got in their dinghies, and kept rowing. It was pretty hopeless. They had no idea where they were going, who was going to find them, and how they were going to get out of there. But they realized the only way to make sure they had a chance was to stick to what they had to do. And so they did. They followed their duties. And as a result, they all survived. So regard this as your duty as you go through the day. It’s something you just stick with. You may not seem to be given the results you want yet, but this is the only opportunity. This is your only way out of here. So when you’ve got something good in the concentration, maintain it. Don’t let the flies get in your food.

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