Discerning Your Discernment

August 13, 2015

John Lee talks about doing concentration work. In other words, we’re not simply allowing the mind to drift gently around. There’s work to be done here. The work is in the direct of thought and evaluation. You’re directing your thought to the breath, and then you want to evaluate it. And the evaluation is where most of the work goes, once you’re able to get the mind together with the breath. And for those of us who tend to have active minds who like to figure things out, the evaluation will actually get you to direct your thoughts more and more to the breath, because you realize the importance of being here with the breath. For instance, you know that if the breath energy isn’t moving well in the body, you’re going to sit here and pretty soon there are going to be pains in the legs or feelings of numbness. Well, don’t wait for the pains and the numbness to come. Figure out, where is the breath not flowing well? And although the numbness may be in the knees, the problem may not be in the knees, or at least the problem with the breath. Start at the back of the neck, right where it joins the skull. The neck bones join the skull. Think of the breath entering there and then going down through the spine, down through the hips, down through the legs, past the knees, and out your toes. You can get working on that pretty quickly. If you know that your time is fifteen minutes or half an hour or whatever, you’ve got that much time in your head. You’ve got time to prepare. And that gives you some motivation to do your concentration work. The evaluation there is the element of discernment that goes into the concentration. And that element may be stronger or weaker, depending on what you really need. But it’s there in right concentration. When we think about the path, every element of the path from right view on is informed by right view. So you want right views to inform your evaluation. One thing about right view is you’re going to be trying to comprehend stress, particularly the stress in the mind. And to do that, you’ve got to be still. So we’re trying to develop a kind of stillness that can comprehend things. If you’re running around all the time, you’re not going to see anything clearly. You’ve got to get the mind still for the purpose of discernment. But that doesn’t mean you have to be thinking about discernment all the time. In the background, there’s right view directing things, telling you you’ve got to settle down if you’re going to see anything clearly. And then you focus all your efforts on settling down. The faculty knows how much it should be involved in investigation and how much it should step back. That’s when the wisdom is really intelligent. Otherwise, you just keep trying to figure this out, figure that out. You get worn down. And many times, if you’re approaching from the wrong angle, if you can’t step back a bit and relax, you won’t be able to realize, “Oh, I’m looking at this from the wrong angle.” So the better part of wisdom is knowing when to be still. After all, as the Buddha said, it’s tranquility that gets you past passion. It’s insight that gets you past ignorance. So it’s not that the tranquility is doing nothing. It’s getting you prepared. It’s putting you in a position where your mind feels better fed, there’s a greater sense of ease, your gaze is steadier. And you can begin to sense your own movements, because a lot of discernment lies in seeing, “Oh, I’ve been looking at this from the wrong angle.” Once you can observe your discernment in action—it’s kind of like two levels of discernment, one triggering the other one out—then you know, “This is the time to relax. This is the time to step back. I’m not getting anywhere.” If you compare the practice to a battle, it’s like having an intelligence unit that goes out and gets the information that the soldiers are going to need to use. And then, many times, when the soldiers are in the midst of the battle, the intelligence unit has to get out of the way. So there will be times, once the evaluation has done its work to get the mind to settle down, you have to let it settle down, just be really, really still. Don’t be concerned that you’re not figuring anything out. This, for me, was an insight I had one time. I was on my alms round trying to meditate, and part of my mind rebelled. “Why are you just staying with the breath? This is stupid. You’re not learning anything. You’re not figuring anything out.” Then I realized what I had to figure out was that voice in the mind that was telling me I was stupid. And the only way to figure that out was to step back from it, go back and be still. It’s the stillness that will stir up things like this in the mind. And if you give in to the frustration or give in to the exasperation or give in to the boredom or whatever, you’ve missed your chance. The stillness of the mind has offered that up for you to see. “This is my problem. This is the way my mind is going to try to destroy the stillness. So now is my chance to watch it.” Don’t leave the stillness. The stillness is putting you in a position where you can watch. And once you’re determined to watch, it’ll probably disappear for a while. But that doesn’t mean it’s gone away for good. So to be truly wise, your discernment has to know when to work and when to step out of the way. And don’t worry that by being still, if you’re actually practicing right concentration, you’re not wandering away from the path, you’re not delaying anything. Think about Ajahn Mani. He let Ajahn Mahaprabhu stay stuck on concentration for eight years before he finally decided it was time to give him a little kick to do more work and discernment. Well, the eight years was not wasted. It was a skill that had to be developed. So appreciate your meditation, appreciate your concentration as a skill. There is some work involved in it, but there’s also a lot of rest and a lot of refreshment. And it’s the ideal place for discernment to really see subtle things. And as I said earlier, it’s the opportunity for discernment to see itself, so it can learn how to manage itself. It’s kind of like a metacognition. Part of the mind is working, and the other part is watching it. But the part that’s watching it is not just concentration. There’s an element of discernment there, too. Trying to catch, “What can I see in the activities of my mind that is not quite as intelligent as I thought?” Or, “Where can I see my discernment do something stupid?” That’s how you develop your discernment. It’s by seeing those things. And you can’t see them if you’re just in the activity of discernment and evaluation all the time. You have to evaluate your evaluation. You have to discern your discernment. It’s this extra layer of being able to step back and observe. That’s what’s going to make all the difference. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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