What Good Is Insight

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We know that one of the reasons we’re meditating is to gain insight. The question is, what kind of insight? What’s the good of insight? We may have heard that an important part of the insight is seeing things in terms of three characteristics—being constant, stressful, not self. But what’s the use of that teaching? What use does it serve? One of the questions has to do with where does it fit in with the four noble truths. It doesn’t really fit in with any specific truth. It’s more connected, this kind of insight is more connected, with the duties appropriate to the truths. And they come under the Buddhist question that lies at the basis of all discernment, of all wisdom, which is, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” That’s the context. In other words, the Buddha is assuming that we want a really lasting happiness, something we can trust. And those three perceptions, that’s what they are. The Buddha never called them three characteristics. He called them three perceptions. Those perceptions help. In all too often, the context gets mixed up. I don’t know how many times I’ve heard people say, “Well, the three characteristics are what you have to start out with. This is the way reality is. Things are impermanent, they’re stressful, and they’re not self.” So how are you going to find happiness within the context of that? In other words, the three perceptions become the context and the question. Trust for happiness has to fit itself into whatever room is provided by those. And they don’t provide much room. It develops a kind of defeatist attitude, “Well, things are impermanent, so you can’t expect permanent happiness. There’s going to be some stress, so you learn to put up with the stress. Things are not self at all, it doesn’t really matter anyhow.” That’s the usual interpretation. So you take your hits of pleasure where you can find them. It’s kind of a bittersweet quality to them. You enjoy things knowing that you’re going to have to let them go. That’s the general attitude. But it’s all very defeatist. The Buddha was not a defeatist at all. He was very lionhearted. He put his life on the line to find a happiness that really did last, something that was about standing value. As he said, if you look for happiness in things that age, grow ill, and die, what kind of life is that? You age, grow ill, and die. Things you’re looking for happiness in age, grow ill, and die. What’s the point of it? There’s a point only if you look for something that doesn’t age, doesn’t grow ill, and doesn’t die. And you can think of those three characteristics as mapping onto that. You take that together with our quest for happiness, something that is long-term, my long-term happiness, and you get the framework for the three characteristics, for the three perceptions. You look at your activities. What are you doing to find happiness? Right now we’re concentrating the mind. But for a lot of us, the attitude is, “I’ll practice meditation and that’s one way I’ll find happiness, and there are a lot of other ways I’d like to find happiness, too.” Just add one more skill to the repertoire, one more possible source of happiness. But there are a lot of things we don’t want to give up. But another one of the basic principles of wisdom is that there are some forms of happiness that get in the way of others. For example, you can’t have the happiness of a solid family and at the same time have the pleasures of going out and having sex with whoever you want. Those two things work across purposes, so you have to decide which is more valuable. Or you can’t have a healthy body, the kind of pleasure that comes from a healthy body, and have the pleasure that comes from eating as much sugar as you want. There are choices you have to make. And the three characteristics help us make those choices. If something is going to be happiness that’s really worth pursuing, you want it to be long-term, and you want it to be something under your control. So if you see that you’re following a pleasure, and if it’s really inconstant, you have to ask yourself, “Is this something that I can trust?” If it’s inconstant, it’s going to be stressful. It doesn’t count as happiness. Not long-term. And if it’s inconstant, stressful, why lay a claim to it as your own? This performs the duty with regard to the four ultimate truths, the things that we look for, that we think are going to be happy and that turn out to be suffering. The Buddha says you want to comprehend them to the point of dispassion. This is what these characteristics do. You think something is going to be happy, but you realize it’s not the goal. It’s not something you can really depend on. They help you develop dispassion for it. So when you realize you’ve got to give it up for a higher happiness, it becomes easier. You see the drawbacks, and they far outweigh the allure. Then you can let go. That teaching on not-self, it’s not saying there is no self. It’s more of a value judgment. As the Buddha said, if something is inconstant, stressful, is it worth claiming as yourself? It’s a value judgment that says basically no. So here the quest for happiness is the context. We’re looking for a true happiness, and the three characteristics fit in there as questions that you ask, ways that you measure the happiness you’ve got. Is it up to standard? Could there be something better? And if you find that things fall under those characteristics, you have to realize that there must be something better. And then you look for it. This requires that the mind be in a good state of concentration, relatively solid. As Ajaan Lee says, when you’re working on concentration, you’re actually fighting against these three characteristics. You’re trying to find something that is constant, pleasurable, at least to some extent under your control. But it gives you a point of reference, something more solid than your usual ways of looking for pleasure. So you can make comparisons. When the mind goes running off to a distraction, does this offer a happiness that’s going to be more lasting than a happiness that can come from concentration, that can come from a trained mind? And the answer will be no. So why do you let that distraction destroy your concentration? In this way, the characteristics of the three perceptions are helping not only with a duty with regard to the First Noble Truth, i.e., comprehending it, but also developing the path. They’re aids in developing concentration. In fact, they aid in all the duties with regard to all the truths. They help you comprehend what suffering is. When you can finally detect what’s causing the suffering, where is the craving for that particular suffering, then they can help you see that the craving itself is nothing you want to hold on to, too. The issue of craving is very precise. We have to be very careful about exactly what it is that we crave. Say, with lust, for instance, we think that we crave another person. Well, maybe that’s not precisely what we crave. We want to take it apart. There are a lot of things about other people, even though they may be attractive. In one way, there are a lot of other things you’ve got to put up with. Is it worth it? Exactly what are you focused on? If you’re not focused on that person, what are you focused on? You dig into the mind to see exactly what it is. What feeling, what perception, what thought construct, what fantasy are you focused on? You see, it really has very little to do with the other person. The question is, do you really want to impose your lust on that other person, considering that they’re just being used for the sake of something else? You see the stress there, and you see that it’s inconstant. You realize you don’t want to hold on to it. You don’t want to identify with it. So these perceptions help with the duty with regard to the cause of stress, which is to abandon it. As I said earlier, they help you develop concentration. Anything else that comes up in the mind that’s going to destroy your concentration, that’s going to weaken your concentration, you have to look at it. Why do you want to go for it? Does it measure up to the Buddhist standards for what count as happiness? If you find that you can apply the three perceptions to that, then it helps you develop some dispassion for the distraction, and that helps you to develop the path. Of course, with the cessation of suffering, there comes a point where even the path itself has done its work, and it’s time to let it go, too. In the passage in the Canon, there’s quite a few that talk about how, once the concentration is solid, then you start analyzing it in terms of the five aggregates. You see that these two, even in the state of concentration, are inconstant. They’re stressful, not-self. The Buddha elaborates on those perceptions. They’re alien. That’s another way of saying not-self. They’re a disease. That’s another way of saying they’re stressful. Whatever the perception, it helps you develop a perception of dispassion. When there’s dispassion, then your involvement with all these things can cease, and that leads to release. So this is what these perceptions are for. It’s like the assaying test that jewelers would do with gold. Gold has to pass a certain number of tests before you accept it as true gold. For happiness, if it’s really going to be something worthwhile, it has to pass these questions. Is it stressful? If it is, okay, then it doesn’t pass the test. Is it inconstant? Nope, it doesn’t pass the test. You find something that has no stress and no inconstancy. The irony there is that at that point, you don’t even want to claim it as you or yours, because you don’t have to lay claim at that point, because even perceptions of self have been let go. But you’ve found something that passes the test. That happiness is really worthwhile. So that’s what’s good about these perceptions. They get you there. So make sure that you use them properly.

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