Discernment in Jhana

May 30, 2017

The Buddha is famous for his lists, the Eightfold Path, the Five Faculties, the Seven Factors for Awakening, the Five Hindrances, the Three This, the Four That, the Five, all the way up to Eight, Nine, Ten. One of the striking features about lists is that once the Buddha divides things into different factors and he starts explaining them, you begin to realize the factors are not totally separate. Like with the factors for concentration in the Eightfold Path, you’ve got right effort, which includes some right view. After all, you have to know what’s skillful and what’s not skillful so you can figure out what to give rise to and what to try to abandon. And then beyond that, it develops discernment in the sense that you have to know how much effort is right, what kind of effort you’re going to be putting into things, and how to talk yourself into wanting to do this. So there’s discernment right there. And then when you move to mindfulness, you’ve got the three qualities of mindfulness, ardency, and alertness. And the ardency is basically right effort. What you add now is that you’re going to remember the lessons you’ve learned from right view and all the other right factors of the path. And then you’re going to watch what’s actually going on very carefully. And you can apply this to the breath, you can apply this to your feelings, mind states, mental qualities. But there’s another division of four that the Buddha brings down to one. If you’re focused on the breath, everything else is right there. After all, when you breathe in and breathe out, there’s a feeling of pleasure. What is that? It’s not feeling. And your mind is there, of course. And then the various mental qualities that you either don’t want to develop or do want to develop are hovering around the mind as you’re trying to get into concentration. So the four are one. And then as you move into concentration, the practice of right mindfulness is the theme of concentration. So it contains all those other things, including discernment. All too often we hear that concentration is one thing and discernment is something else. Or mindfulness is one thing and concentration is something else. Or tranquility and insight are two very different things. But actually they’re all together right there. As as John Lee explains, alertness turns into singleness of preoccupation. Mindfulness turns into directive thought. Ardency turns into evaluation. That’s the factor that contains the insight and the discernment. So they’re all here, all these different faculties, all these different qualities. But in the beginning, you don’t want to think too much about them. Just realize they’re all here and you can use any of them as you need. Some people find that when they tell themselves to settle down with the breath, there’s not much of a struggle. The mind settles with the body, the body feels okay, the mind feels okay, and things come together very easily. With other people, it’s not so easy, either because the mind is shooting out in all directions and you have to learn how to bring it back in here. Or else once you bring the mind here, then there’s a pair of different weird sensations that come up in the body that you’ve got to adjust. That’s the work of evaluation, i.e., ardency, i.e., right effort, all of which contain discernment. So look at what you’ve got. If the mind settles down properly, you don’t have to think too much about it. Just tend to it, make sure that it doesn’t wander off. If it’s not settling down easily, that’s when you have to use your evaluation to figure out what you need to change. The question might be what you need to change in the breath. Is it too long, too short, too heavy, too light, too fast, too slow? Can you make changes in the breath? Does that make it easier to settle down with the breath? If it doesn’t, then maybe the problem is with the mind. What are you holding in mind right now that’s preventing you from wanting to settle down? Because the mind can have many minds all at once, many different opinions running around at the same time. And some of the opinions inside may want to stay with the breath, and others may want to go someplace else. So how do you get everybody on board? Sometimes it requires a little bit of reasoning. Sometimes it simply means changing your perception. Realizing that as you’re working with the breath, it’s not just in/out, in/out, or long or short. There are many levels of breath energy in the body. And if you have a chronic illness or chronic pain, you can use those energies to work with it. That way you find the right balance. The mind has an intuitive way of dealing with the energies in the body. So you want to get in touch with what is the way you do this normally, and to what extent is it a problem. Do you try to put a shell around pains in the body, other parts of the body that kind of cringe for fear that they’re going to be hurt? In other words, they’re very sensitive? Try to sort through the body. See if you can get interested in this issue of breath energies. Because it is a strange sort of thing. We’ve got a mind which is an awareness, but we’ve also got a body. And the mind can pick up messages from the body, and the mind can also tell the body what to do, to some extent. How does that happen? What happens through the breath? So there’s plenty to explore here. If the type of person who doesn’t simply want to stick with one thing, one thing, one thing, one thing, and not think about anything, if your mind has a tendency that likes to figure things out, use that to figure out the breath, figure out your relationship to the breath, until you get a sense that the mind can settle down snugly with the breath. That’s when you can drop the evaluation. You can simply be with the breath. That’s a sense that the mind and the breath become one. And there will be a little commentator inside, that little remnant of evaluation. And as long as it’s keeping you with the breath, that’s fine. Sometimes though, it starts coming up with other comments, saying, “This is getting boring. There’s nothing interesting going on right now.” You can tell yourself, “Well, you’ve spent your life trying to be interesting, now trying to be uninteresting.” In other words, you’re learning new skills, which are not quite like the skills you had before. The mind that likes to figure things out needs to be quiet for the time being. Because if it does too much analysis, it wears itself out. And then its analysis tends to spin away from the present moment. And also, sometimes it’s not seeing things clearly enough because it’s got too much activity going on. So you want to be as quiet as possible. Convince yourself of the need for quiet in the mind. Not a dull kind of quiet. You have to be alert. In John Cumdee’s images of a hunter who’s very still but has to be very alert. If you’re not still, you scare away the animals. If you’re not alert, the animals will come right in front of your nose and you know they’re there. So try to bring things into balance. This is where, again, the work of evaluation continues for a while. If you notice that things are getting out of balance, you bring them back in. You have to learn how to pass judgment on this concentration skill that you’re developing here. So even though the higher levels of concentration don’t have evaluation listed in the factors, it’s lurking there sometimes in the background just enough so you can know where you are and what you’re doing. And you can send out warning signals when things are not quite right. So it’s in this way that, as the Buddha said, if you want to develop concentration, you need to develop both calm and insight. At least enough insight to understand how to get the mind to settle down and how to keep it there. The two qualities go together. They are separate, but they work together. And ideally they help each other along, to the point where the line between the two of them is blurred. But that doesn’t matter because you’re trying to get everything in the mind into one, the whole mind into one. Because when everybody’s together like this, then they can see each other. And you can see them seeing each other, interacting with each other. And that’s when your insight becomes your own. It’s not a matter of simply going around and saying, “Inconstant, stressful, non-self. Inconstant, stressful, non-self.” Instead, you can see what’s unskillful about what you’re doing and then drop what’s unskillful and try to be more skillful. In doing that, you’re letting go of a lot of unskillful things in the mind. And your sensitivity to what’s skillful and what’s not skillful grows stronger as well, more refined. So you develop a dispassionate awareness. You develop a dispassionate awareness for things that are unskillful, things that are relatively gross compared to the more refined sense of well-being you want. And so whether you’re thinking in terms of the three characteristics or whatever, that doesn’t matter. The fact that you see that something is unskillful, something is not quite right, and you see it thoroughly enough that you can drop it, that’s the activity of insight. So they’re all right here, all these qualities we need to develop. The problem is there are other qualities that are inherent as well. You have to learn how to sort out what’s skillful and what’s not. But when you’ve got the skillful factors working together, they help each other along. You don’t have to sort them out and say, “Well, now we’re doing mindfulness, and now we’re doing concentration, and now we’re doing discernment.” You’re trying to do all of them all at the same time. It’s just a question that sometimes one will be more prominent than others. But it’s because they can work together, that’s how they get the results that you want.

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