Cooking the Mind

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There are three levels of discernment. There’s the discernment that comes from reading or listening, the discernment that comes from thinking things through, and then there’s the discernment that comes from developing the mind. And these grow progressively. In other words, certain things you learn just by listening, reading, in other words, there’s that piece of information. And then when you try to put the different pieces together, thinking them through, that’s when you learn more about them. See where things fit, see where things don’t seem to fit. But then the issues don’t get resolved until you actually try to develop the mind. That’s where the real discernment comes from. The things you read about, things you thought about, things you heard about, now you actually see them in action. And seeing them in action is when you really can do something about them. Up to that point, they’re just ideas. The Ajahns give the analogy that meditation is like cooking the mind. You think about making scrambled eggs. You can read certain things about making scrambled eggs ahead of time, like the fact that you don’t want to make the heat too high, otherwise the eggs will turn into rubber. So you put it over very low heat and you start stirring and stirring and stirring, and nothing seems to happen. Then you may want to speed up the process, thinking only if you knew more about eggs or could theorize more about it, the eggs would cook more quickly. But they don’t. If you use too much heat to make them cook more quickly, you ruin the eggs. But as you stir and stir and stir, then finally you begin to realize, “Okay, something is coagulating on the bottom of the pan.” And you begin to see, “Okay, this is what they were talking about.” That element of patience is important because all too often we read about the path and we want to think that somehow we can analyze it ahead of time and speed up the process. Then reading does help. It helps to avoid certain problems. Thinking things through helps to avoid certain problems. But there are a lot of issues that are not going to be resolved until you sit down and actually cook the mind. We read about the aggregates, we read about the different kinds of clinging, and they don’t really become clear until you actually try working with the mind. And then the activity of the different aggregates begins to separate out. You see very clearly that this is what form is and this is what feelings are and this is what perceptions are and this is what fabrications are and this is what consciousness is. And as they separate out, then you get a better sense of where you’re holding onto them and what you’re going to do to let go. John Lee’s analogy is taking a rock and throwing it into a smelter, and as you put the heat on, in other words, the heat of the practice, first the tin comes out, then the lead, then the zinc, then the silver, then the gold. As the heat gets higher and higher, you hit the melting points of the different metals. They separate out on their own. So a lot of the analysis we do ahead of time can be helpful sometimes. But if you really want to see what the Buddha is talking about, you’ve got to sit down and basically sit where he was sitting. He was sitting here watching his breath. He was doing his best to get the mind into concentration. In the process of doing that, things came up in the mind. First you begin to notice that there were skillful thoughts and unskillful thoughts. The thoughts that were conducive to concentration are the ones that were not. Then you have to deal with them differently. But as for which defilement you deal with first, or which issue you deal with first, the issue in the body or the issue in the mind, that depends a lot on your own karma. There was one time when the king of Thailand went to visit Lumbudun and asked him which defilement should be abandoned first. He said, “Whichever one comes up first, you abandon that one.” In other words, they don’t come in a neat line like they’re in the books. It’s not the case that you first have sensual desire and then you have to deal with ill will, and then you deal with sloth and tarper, and then the other hindrances in a row. Whichever one comes up, you have to deal with that. It may not be the issue you planned to deal with as you were sitting here meditating. But in the course of cooking the mind, this is what came out. The same applies to the body. There may be pains, there may be diseases in the body you didn’t plan for, but there they are. That may be the issue you have to deal with tonight. So take the issues as they come. Remembering that the basic approach is you focus on the breath, try to get the mind with the breath, with a sense of ease and well-being. Because that gives you a good handle to deal with a lot of things, both in the body and in the mind. When I was in France last month, I was being interviewed, and the interviewer asked me, “You’re talking about always trying to be skillful in your actions. Can’t you just sit and watch for a while?” And I said, “Well, sometimes that is the skillful action, to sit and watch. But also, when you’re sitting and watching, you need a good foundation. Otherwise, if something really big or bad comes along, you don’t have a good place to stand. You can get knocked over really easily.” So your awareness of the breath, with a sense that the two of them fit together, that’s your basic stance. That’s the basic principle of the skill we’re developing here. As the jhanfueng would say. And again, as I said, this is where the Buddha was sitting. This is where his mind was sitting on the night of his awakening, just right there with the breath, dealing with things as they came up, and of course, trying to keep the mind still with the breath. So this requires a fair amount of practice. A fair amount of patience. Because things will come up that you, as I said, don’t particularly plan on or don’t really want to face. But these are the issues that come up. There are some issues you realize, “It’s a bigger issue than I can handle right now.” And so you find some way of pushing it off to the side a bit. In other words, unentangling yourself as best you can in the present moment and file it away for later, when the mind is stronger. In this case, it’s like learning how to be a boxer. You don’t take on the world champion right away. You work your way up. When you feel that you’re ready, then you take on the big issues. If there are issues that are getting in the way of concentrating at all, this is when you bring in the discernment you’ve learned from the books. This is a problem. And there are strategies in the books for dealing with them. Sometimes you find the strategies work, and sometimes they don’t. The question is, did you understand the strategy? Or maybe the problem isn’t quite what you thought. This is where you have to use your discernment based on thinking. Thinking of different variations that you can create in the strategy. The Buddha gives five ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. One is just replacing the thought with another thought, a more skillful thought, that can either be coming back to the breath or trying to figure out something that would be a skillful antidote. Lust comes up, you contemplate the unattractiveness of the different parts of the body. Anger comes up, you try to develop goodwill for yourself. That kind of thing. That’s one approach. If that doesn’t work and you find the mind keeps going back and back and back, you’ve got to actively think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, where it would lead you if you continued your thinking in that way. If that doesn’t work, consciously ignore it. The thought can be there, but you realize the breath is still here. The thought doesn’t destroy the breath. So hold on to the breath as best you can. The second approach is, when you begin to notice that each thought has a pattern of tension that accompanies it and provides a marker in the body that helps keep you in reference to that thought, dissolve the marker with the breath if you can. Relax it. If that doesn’t work, then the fifth approach is to bear down on the mind and say, “I’m just not going to think that thought.” You have to work out variations on them. Like with that last one, you might add a meditation word, butto, butto, butto, really fast. When you think about the drawbacks of thought, it might not necessarily be the drawbacks of what kind of activity is going to lead to it. You might think, “If this thought were a movie, would I pay to watch it?” That’s not there in the text, but it’s a variation that can work. In other words, use your ingenuity and then try things out. This is where your thinking then becomes part of the developing. Concentration is not mindless. It is not thinkingless. It’s just learning how to use your thought and apply it directly to the problem that’s coming up. If the problem is really your body, your health is not what you want, ask yourself, “Where in the body is there a part that I can make comfortable?” And any thoughts that come up about how frustrating it is for the body to be disobeying you right now, “I shouldn’t be doing this until you’re quite a bit older.” Well, the body’s doing it. What are you going to do? You say, “This is where I’m going to stay right now.” Learn how to find a spot that you can take as your safe place. Then see what you can do with the breath that would actually alleviate the problem. You may not be able to solve it, but at least you can make it not such a burden on the mind. Then remember all the things that they say about how we’re lucky that we have this moment to practice. Keep focusing on this moment, this moment, as for the moments in the past. There’s John Lee’s image of a person out plowing a field, and the dirt falls off the plow and you gather up the dirt and you put it in a bag. Of course, that’s going to weigh you down. Or if you think about how much more dirt there is that you have to plow ahead of time, that thought gets you depressed. You just focus on what you’re doing, what you’re doing, what you’re doing. That lightens a lot of the burdens right there. So this discernment that comes from developing, a lot of times you find yourself having to develop qualities or deal with problems that you didn’t expect. They weren’t there in the books, or at least they weren’t there in your plan for the practice. So you have to learn how to put the plans aside. Say, “This is the problem that’s coming up right now. I’ll deal with this problem. I’ve got the tools. I’ve got the breath. But it’s a different analysis. When an emotion comes up, you’ve got the breath, you’ve got the way you’re talking to yourself about it, you’ve got the perception, you’ve got the feeling. Analyze it in those terms. It’s usually the perception that’s a problem. What’s the underlying perception that’s causing the fear or the anger or the aversion or the greed or the lust that keeps you wanting to come back to it even though you know the drawbacks? So stay with the breath, adjust the breath, and then ask yourself about those perceptions. If you’re not sure about what the perceptions are, give yourself new perceptions. And if an old perception is lodged pretty heavily in the mind and you have some heavy investment in it, it’ll start coming out to defend itself. In other words, you poke it. Try a new perception. And see how the mind objects. Like the contemplation of the parts of the body. A lot of people object to that contemplation. Then the issue is what inside you is objecting. What does not want to see the unattractive side of the body? That’s your problem. The contemplation itself is not the problem. The contemplation there is to cook your mind. So the problem comes oozing out in this case. In other words, in this case it’s not tin or lead or gold. The defilements come oozing out as well when you hit their melting point. So don’t try to plan things ahead of time about how it’s going to go. You apply the basic technique and then you cook the mind with it. And the good and bad things, they’ll come out. The technique is here to give you a handle on how to deal with them and how to develop your own ingenuity, because that’s a lot of where discernment comes from—being sensitive to new problems that come out and being ingenious in dealing with them. It’s not just a matter of applying the Buddhist categories of the five aggregates of the different kinds of clinging there in the background. But it’s your ingenuity in applying them that’s going to make the discernment yours. It turns it from discernment in the books to discernment that comes from the practice. You’ve got it right when you start getting the results. But it requires patience, because a lot of the unskillful things in the mind know how to hide out. So you have to be patient in watching them. Because they will have to show themselves. But if you’re not patient enough, the time when they show themselves, you’ve gone on to something else. So watch patiently. Apply just the right amount of heat. And then you see the results coming in the mind.

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