Discernment Fosters Concentration

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There are times when you sit down and meditate with the breath and the mind finds it easy to settle down. Take a couple of good, long, deep, in-and-out breaths. Long breathing feels good. And you settle right in. There are other times, though, when the mind is not willing to settle in. It usually has some issue, something that’s tied to the world, tied to the day. And you have to learn how to untie it. It’s like finding yourself caught. Sometimes when I’ve gone hiking in the Southwest, my rope gets stuck in a thorn bush, and you have to stop and very carefully take the cloth off of each thorn. And often the thorns are not going in the same direction. So you have to make sure they don’t just pull the cloth or rip it. You have to very meticulously take it one thorn at a time. Some of the mind, if it’s carrying issues in from the day, you have to disentangle it. You have to pull it out of those thorns. And the Buddha gives recommendations for things you can think about. If you’re concerned about issues of survival, issues of your income, he has you remind yourself, “What is this body that you’re worried about? It’s just elements. Earth, water, we have fire. It came from the earth. It’s going to go back to the earth.” If your main concern is just its survival, what are you going to be left with when it goes? You have to remind yourself that you can use this body for good things. You can use it to be generous. You can use it to be virtuous. You can use it to meditate. Then you’ve got something good out of it. The time comes when you have to leave it, you can take the profit with you. You can take the goodness with you as you leave the body behind. That gives you some perspective on what the best use of your body is right now. Use it to develop the mind. There are times when you’re angry at somebody. This is when the Buddha would have you develop thoughts of goodwill. Remind yourself that nothing is accomplished by being angry, especially you don’t want the anger to turn into ill-will, i.e. decide the other person suffers. Because what would be accomplished by that? Part of your mind would say, “Well, maybe they’ll learn a lesson.” But most people don’t learn that kind of lesson. We see this all around us. People misbehaving and suffering because of their misbehavior, and then they blame the suffering on other people. So the proper attitude is, “May this person come to his or her senses, realize the foolishness of his or her actions, and learn to behave in a skillful way, be willing and happy to behave in a skillful way.” Or you can have that attitude. It’s a lot easier to disentangle yourself from whatever narratives you’re carrying around from the day. Instead of trying to feed off the idea, “If I keep the narrative in mind, maybe someday justice will be done. If I can remember all the wrongdoings, we’ll be able to tally them up.” That’s a miserable life, a miserable state of mind. Because you have to realize that, from the Buddha’s point of view, whatever the conflict is did not start with this lifetime. It’s been going on for many, many lifetimes. And how are you going to keep a tally of that? How are you going to count those up? Where do you start? It’s better just to let the issue go. This sometimes involves goodwill, sometimes it involves equanimity, when you realize, “Well, maybe that person’s not going to change his ways. But at least I don’t have to get caught up in that person’s story.” This way you free yourself. You can think about the Buddha, the perspective he gained on life from his awakening. Many, many, many, many lifetimes. Realizing that the best thing to do would be to get out. But before he got out, he also developed lots of goodwill. He didn’t just run away from the world. He trained himself so he could leave behind a good Dhamma, a good Vinaya. He can be an inspiring example. How many people do you know who are presented with an opportunity to have lots of power, lots of wealth, and basically walk away, saying, “No, there’s got to be something better. Something that would be good for all human beings.” And he shows us the way. We may not be able to be a Buddha like him, but we can behave in such a way that the fact that we’ve been in this world, we leave something good behind. And we benefit too. The whole purpose of this is to think in ways that get you disentangled. And then, of course, there’s contemplation of death. Death could come at any time. And you want to make sure that you develop the mind as best you can in the meantime. So when are you going to do that? We’ve got to do it now. If you don’t do it now, the time may not come. And even if you do live longer, as you get older, it gets harder and harder to sit long hours in practice, and it gets harder and harder to put out the physical side of the effort. So you want to make sure you’ve got the mental side down while you’re healthy, while you’re young, while you’re still alive. Because our problem is, as the Buddha said, we get intoxicated with youth, health, and life. We’re young, we think, “We’re not going to get old easily.” You see other people get old, and you say, “Well, that’s their fault. They didn’t know how to look after themselves.” You see other people get sick, and again, you can say, “Well, they didn’t look after themselves.” But you have to realize, the nature of the body, no matter how well you take care of it, it’s going to get old. It’s going to get sick, and it’s going to die at some point. So you can’t look down on old, sick, or dead people. And you realize, “Okay, I can’t be intoxicated with these things, because too often when you’re intoxicated with these things, I can put off doing good to some other time.” But if you’re really heedful, and alert, and sober, you realize, “I’m going to do good now.” You can think in these ways. It helps you get out of the narratives of the day, all the news that the world has, all the news that you have at your workplace, all the news in the house, family. It gets you thinking to what is really in your own best interest. And when you can think in those terms, then it’s a lot easier to settle down. You’ve disentangled yourself from all those thorns. And now the mind is more ready to settle down, and let its awareness spread throughout the body. This is called using discernment to foster concentration. Guruji Mahaprabhu wrote his book with that title. It was considered controversial, as you hear again and again. Concentration fostered by virtue is great fruit, great benefit. Discernment fostered by concentration is great fruit, great benefit. When the mind is fostered with discernment, it gains release. It makes it sound like the three steps. You complete virtue, and then you complete concentration, and then you complete discernment. But the Buddha must not have meant it that way, because there are other places where he talks about discernment. Discernment coming first. You look at the factors for the Noble Path. Right view, right resolve come first. Then the virtue factors, then the concentration factors. There are the seven factors for awakening. First you have mindfulness, then you have discernment, and then the discernment is what gives rise to concentration. So lots of different ways these trainings can help one another. In fact, they have to help one another. You need some good concentration. You need to see your intentions clearly, so that your observance of the precepts and your general practice in virtue is very clear about where the potentials for mistakes are. Because virtue is basically all about intention. So you want to be able to see your intentions clearly. Well, you need to get the mind very still to do that. And you need some discernment to figure out how to get past an unskillful intention and how to foster skillfulness. Practicing the precepts requires not only virtue, but also concentration and discernment. When you’re doing concentration, you need virtue to make sure that your concentration stays honest. You need discernment to understand how to get past any particular defilements that are standing in the way. So all the factors of the triple training help one another along. If you’ve got to a point in your practice where you need some discernment to get the mind concentrated, you use it. It’s through using it that you develop it. You can’t wait until concentration is fully developed and then develop your discernment. You can’t wait until your discernment is already strong before you use it. It’s like exercising your body. You can’t wait until the body is strong and then go down to the gym. You take your weak body down to the gym, you exercise it there, and it gets strong. And you want it to all get strong in a balanced way. So work on your virtue and your concentration and discernment, stressing whichever one needs to be emphasized at any particular time. Alert to the fact that it’s not just a staircase of one step to the next step to the other. It’s three good qualities of the mind that strengthen one another as they grow. you

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