Discernment Is in the Doing

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There was a book years back that discussed the Buddha’s teachings in the context of the Four Noble Truths. And then the author didn’t know where to put the Brahma-viharas in the context of those truths. So he just tacked them on at the end. Actually, the Brahma-viharas were an important part of the Noble Eightfold Path. They were there and write resolve, which is a part of discernment. Once you’ve learned why there’s suffering and how suffering can be ended, you make the resolve to act in ways that will put an end to suffering. So insight isn’t just a matter of registering facts. There’s a determination, realization that there’s something has to be done based on those facts. And you want to do it well. The three resolves are resolve on renunciation, resolve on non-ill-will, and resolve on harmlessness. Non-ill-will, of course, is goodwill. In fact, all the Brahma-viharas come under that. As for harmlessness, the expression of harmlessness is compassion. In other words, you see people are down, they’re in a position of weakness and suffering. And you’re not going to pile on. You want them to get out of that suffering. Of course, that applies to you too. You see that you’re suffering, so you want to get out of that suffering. This is the motivation for our practice. You might say of the two wisdom or discernment factors, this is the heart part. The heart, of course, being not only your emotions but also your will, your determination that you’re going to do something about what you’ve learned. Because what you’ve learned in the Four Noble Truths, in terms of right view, is there’s work to be done. The reason why there’s suffering is not because of anything else that someone else has done. It’s because of things you’re doing. You’ve got to change your ways. This is going to require effort, because a lot of things you do are based on what you like to do. After all, the suffering itself is clinging. The cause of the suffering is craving. We cling to things that we want. We crave things that we want, things that we like. So a lot of the path is going to have to go against the grain. This is why in the Buddha, when he illustrated the path with images, he used, on the one hand, warriors going into battle, and then two, craftspeople learning a craft, like cooking or carpentry. There’s no image of anyone just relaxing their way to Nibbana. So you have to have the right attitude. What is the attitude of a warrior? Well, one, you’re going to take on battles that you know have a chance of winning, and that will be worthwhile to win. You don’t just jump into every battle. You ask yourself, what’s to be gained by taking on this fight? In this case, of course, the Buddha says the total end of suffering. That’s something you’re going to have to do. Nobody else can do it for you. So when you’re sitting here working with the breath, you’re going to have to learn how to evaluate the breath on your own. What kind of breathing feels good for you right now? You wouldn’t have a monk wandering through the room telling you, now you’ve got to breathe in long, now you’ve got to breathe in short, heavy, light, whatever. You’ve got to ask yourself, what kind of breathing feels good? Try different alternatives. This is where we get into a skill. Because remember, warriors need their skills too. They have to be skilled at archery, they have to be skilled at strategy, and they have to learn how to read a situation. It’s like those people who go into the woods in Alaska, deciding that they want to have a pure woods experience. Nature experience. The ones who survive, though, are the ones who realize that sometimes you have to use modern skills, and sometimes you have to use ancient skills. You’ve got to read the situation for what’s needed. You can’t go in with dogmatic ideas. This is why the Buddha never taught, say, an insight practice or an insight technique. He said simply, the questions you raise about how to get the mind still to begin with, then how to gain insight into the process of fabrication. In other words, your participation in creating your own experience. That’s what fabrication is. He raises the questions, you’ve got to learn how to come to the answers. This is a large part, again, of what a skill requires. So you think of the three attitudes that the Buddha said. You have to bring to the practice one is ardency, the desire to do this well. He puts that first. Then you’re alert to see what you’re actually doing. And then you’re mindful, which means you bring in your memory of what you’ve done in the past, what’s worked and what hasn’t worked. So when you find yourself presented with a particular problem, you ask yourself, well, what is the nature of this problem? Say something unskillful comes up in the mind. Is this something I should accept? Is this something that I should try to understand first and then get rid of it? Have I ever had dealings with this particular problem before? Have I been able to overcome thoughts of lust before, thoughts of anger before? You bring in your memory. And if you can’t remember having dealt with this particular problem before, then you try to use your ingenuity. Figure out, well, what would work? Here again, the Buddha gives you some ideas. Maybe you can change the way you breathe. Maybe you can change the way you talk to yourself. What perceptions are you holding in mind? Could you change them? Those are some of the parameters. But you’re going to have to learn for yourself. When you’re alert to see something’s actually working, then you remember it for the next time around. Now there’s three qualities. The one that’s most closely associated with discernment is the ardency. This again relates to right resolve. The determination to act in the proper way based on what you’ve learned. We’re not here just passively watching. We’re watching a process that’s being presented to us ready-made. We’re in the process of shaping these things. Which is why the Buddha said, when you practice, you not only commit yourself to the practice, you also reflect. This is where a lot of people fall down. They get some doctrinaire ideas from reading. They just stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. And they’re not really judging what’s working, what’s not working. They’re not using their ingenuity as to what could work better. They’re just putting the mind through a meat grinder. And the meat grinders don’t give insight. The insight comes from looking at what you’re doing. And suddenly seeing things that you’re doing that you never saw before, but you’ve been doing them all along. And you can see whether they’re helping or whether they’re not. You exercise your discernment by acting on it. You strengthen it by using it. It’s like exercising your body. You don’t wait until your body is strong and then take it down to the gym. You take it down to the gym when it’s weak. And then you learn how to strengthen it by using it. And then ideally you don’t leave your strength at the gym. You use it in your other activities throughout life. The same with meditation. You’re not here just to have a nice meditation. You’re here to learn skills that you’re going to use as you go through the day. Skills that require that you be active. So these are the active applications of wisdom, of discernment. You take what you’ve learned, you put it to use. You take the attitude of a crafts person, you take the attitude of a warrior. There are a lot of things you’re going to learn from what you’re told, but a lot of more things you’re going to learn from doing and observing what you’ve done. And where are you going to get the strength to do all of this? From the concentration. This is where I work so much at getting the mind still. It gives you the strength so you don’t simply give up, but also provides you with an area in which you can watch what’s actually going on with the minimum of interference. It’s like tuning a radio. You tune into the station and you’re not quite there with the frequency and there’s going to be a lot of static. There’ll be interference from other stations. But when you get the radio tuned just right, the static goes away, the interference goes away, and you hear clearly what’s being said and the music that’s being played. The same way when you get the mind really still, you can hear a lot of things in the mind, see a lot of things in the mind that you wouldn’t have seen when it was running around. So it’s not just work, work, work, in terms of right effort. After all, right resolve, the Buddha says, becomes noble, turns into right concentration. The renunciation there, you renounce sensual thoughts. The non-ir will, the harmlessness, all come together as the mind settles down. So try to bring the mind to stillness. For some people it’s very easy, you just drop everything and there you are. Other people have trouble dropping things. They need to have reasons. They need to work through certain defilements. But whichever case it is for you, realize that the pursuit of stillness is an important part of the path. The Buddha, after all, put it as the central factor of the path. The rest he said are its requisites, its aids. But right in the middle of the path is right concentration. It’s not in the middle of the list, but in the actual practice that’s where it is. So the effort to bring the mind into concentration, and then to reflect on it, see what you learn from a mind in concentration. A lot of the path is right there.

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