Appropriate Attention

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When you listen to a Dhamma talk, while you’re meditating, you have to remember that the talk has a purpose. And you have to ask yourself, what is your purpose in listening? Ideally, the purpose of the talk is to help you understand where there’s suffering, what causes it, the fact that it can be brought to an end, and then how you do that. And if you listen with that purpose in mind, understanding these things, bringing these questions, how do these teachings relate to how I’m suffering right now? How do they relate to how I’m causing suffering for myself? How I might use them to put an end to suffering? That’s called appropriate attention. That’s when you get the most out of the talk. Just keep in mind that while you’re meditating, you’re already doing something that the talk recommends, which is to develop the path, trying to bring the mind into a mindful state of concentration, where it’s still, but very alert. Because it’s in that state that you can begin to see what the talk is talking about. We spend most of our lives rushing around, and everything we see is a blur. You run past a tree, it’s a blur. You run past a car, you run past a building, it’s a car blur and a building blur. If you want to see these things clearly, you have to stop and be very still. And then you can see which things are moving, which things are not. It’s the same in the mind. If you’re rushing around, everything in the mind seems to be moving. There’s nothing very still, nothing very solid. On the other hand, though, you might think, well, when you see something moving, maybe it’s because you’re moving. So you don’t really know what’s moving and what’s not. But when you’re still, you can see these things clearly. Because you want to see in your mind when craving moves, because that is the cause of suffering, and when clinging moves, because that’s suffering itself. This is something a lot of people don’t understand, which is why the Buddha said that our duty with regard to suffering is to comprehend it. Most of us try to push it away, or run away from it, which is not the duty. One of my teachers once said that when he was a young monk, he had chronic headaches. It got so bad that he had to have people staying with him in case he woke up in the middle of the night in heavy pain, to bring in compresses, to bring in medicine. One night he woke up, and everybody who was supposed to be looking after him was fast asleep. His first thought was, “Who’s looking after whom here?” And he said, “Well, as long as he’s awake, I might as well meditate.” So he sat down to meditate, and he realized that he’d been doing it wrong, relating to the headache wrong. He’d been trying to push it away, trying to get rid of it. Whereas the Buddha taught that suffering is something you want to comprehend. You have to comprehend that it is the clinging. And the clinging is your desire and passion about something. It could be about your body, it could be about your feelings, the images you have in mind, the thoughts with which you talk to yourself. Or even just your consciousness. As you cling to these things, that’s suffering. And the clinging can be divided into the act of passion and desire, which is craving itself, and the fact that it’s latched on. The image the Buddha gives is when he’s talking about clinging, and the word he uses also means to feed. Whereas the word for craving also means to thirst for something, to hunger for something. So basically, the basic image is one of feeding. You’re hungry, you look for something. Then when you latch on to it, and as you’re feeding, you’re still not full. So there’s still the desire, the craving aimed at that object, but now it’s latched on. Those things go very closely together. So you want to be able to separate them out. As the Buddha said, “Wisdom lies in seeing things as separate, things which tend to go on together.” So you know that in those two things, the craving of the passion and desire on one hand, and these aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness on the other, the craving is to be abandoned. And you have to comprehend those aggregates that you’re clinging to. That’s called appropriate attention. So as you go through your meditation, you run across something that wears the mind down, weighs the mind down. Ask yourself, “What are you craving? What are you clinging?” And if you can see that you’re craving something that’s causing that weight on the mind, how about letting it go? Because each of those four truths, the Four Noble Truths, has a duty. The duty with regard to suffering, as he said, is to comprehend it. The duty with regard to its cause is to abandon it. And you’re trying to realize the cessation of suffering. See the reality of the cessation of suffering in your awareness. And you do that by developing the path. So for most of us as we’re meditating, the big question should be, “What should I develop right now? What should I let go?” That’s what appropriate attention is all about. Like right now you’re trying to develop mindfulness. You’re trying to develop concentration. Anything else that comes into the mind, you can regard it as a hindrance, something that’s blocking the concentration. So it should be let go. You’re setting down some new rules inside. Because for most of us, when craving comes, we take it as our companion. As the Buddha said, we go around with it, listen to what it has to say, believe what it has to say, thinking that it’s our friend. But now we have to take a new approach. It’s actually causing us to suffer, so we have to let it go. And there may be some nostalgia and all the good things you learned from your craving or experienced through your craving. But you have to reflect on them. Where are they now? And what was the price? When we go for things that we crave, we very rarely think about the price. And then when the price comes in the form of suffering, we feel that it’s been imposed on us for some other reason. We don’t see the connection. That’s an important part of appropriate attention. Seeing the connection between our clingings and cravings and the suffering that we experience. Realizing it’s something that we’re doing. If you blame your suffering on things outside, on individuals outside, on the system outside, that’s inappropriate attention. You’re not paying attention in the right way. Because what attention is for the Buddha is a matter of which questions you focus on trying to answer. And here are the questions you want to answer. What is suffering? Why is there suffering? What can I do to put an end to it? Those questions are worth answering. Other questions the Buddha said, “Don’t worry. They’re not important.” And in most cases, the questions you put aside, it’s not the case that you do the work for awakening, and then once you get awakening, then you’re going to have some free time to think about those other questions. The Buddha said once you get awakening, you look at a lot of those other questions, and they weren’t worth asking to begin with. They were based on strange assumptions that were totally irrelevant. So you learn how to let those issues go. The image the Buddha gives is of a man who’s been shot by an arrow. And they bring him to a surgeon, and the surgeon is going to pull the arrow out. Now there are some people who would like to know who shot the arrow, what was the arrow made of, what were the feathers that were used, what kind of tip did it have. If you tried to trace all that down, the person wounded by the arrow would probably die. You take the arrow out, and then you’re done with it. So you focus on the questions that really are worth answering. What is my suffering? What am I doing to cause it? What can I do to put an end to the suffering? Once you take responsibility for your suffering in that way, then your attention is going to be appropriate. You’re asking the right questions. And as you get the mind still, you’re doing the right things for getting good answers to that question. So focus your attention right now on developing this quality of mindfulness. In other words, you try to remember to stay with the breath. If you wander off, you come right back. To develop mindfulness, you need alertness and ardency. Alertness means watching what you’re doing as you’re doing it, and seeing the results. And then ardency is trying to do this well. So when you’ve made up your mind, you want to stay here. Mindfulness is what remembers. Alertness is what watches to make sure you’re doing it right. And if you’re not doing it right, ardency says, well, this is what you’ve got to do. Get back on course. If you’re on course already, then ardency says, well, how can we do this better? Because that’s one of the parts of the meditation that’s always important. It is something you develop. We’re not just resting in the awareness that’s already there. We’re trying to understand why is it that we take that awareness and can turn it into suffering very easily. As long as that habit is still there, we haven’t solved the problem. Some people like to say, “Oh, just be aware, aware, aware.” “Don’t make any effort. It’s all very simple.” That’s the reality right now. Well, it is the reality right now. But as long as your awareness has a potential for grabbing onto things again, it hasn’t been trained. You haven’t observed the duties of the Four Noble Truths. You haven’t been paying appropriate attention. So there’s work to be done. But it’s good work. It’s not true that it’s in any way mean or dishonest. It’s all very upright, honest, clear-eyed, compassionate. Compassionate in the sense that when you stop creating suffering for yourself, you benefit, but the people around you benefit too. When we’re suffering, we’re constantly trying to lean on other people in one way or another. But when there’s no suffering inside, there’s no need to lean. When you get to that state, that shows that you’ve applied this principle of appropriate attention and gotten benefits from it.

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