Discernment Fosters Concentration

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The Buddha sometimes describes the path as the Noble Eightfold Path. Sometimes he describes the practice as a triple training. Training in heightened virtue, heightened mind or concentration, and heightened discernment. With the Noble Eightfold Path, he’s telling you how you learn about the different factors of the path. You start out with Right View. The path is part of the Four Noble Truths. And you understand the function of the path. It’s to put an end to suffering. You do that by comprehending the suffering, abandoning the cause. You abandon the cause by developing the path that allows you to realize cessation of suffering. From there you decide, “I have to embellish any thoughts in my mind that would get in the way of understanding this or practicing this.” That leads you to Right Resolve. There’s resolve and renunciation, which is your determination. You want to find happiness. It’s not dependent on sensuality. The Buddha defines sensuality as our fascination with the sensual plans, sensual desires. We’re actually more attached to our fantasies than we are to actual things, because the fantasies allow for infinite variations. And things are just things. You find yourself frustrated with one thing, or desire one kind of sensual object. Well, you can find others. You realize you want to find a happiness that lets go of those thoughts. You also want to resolve on non-ill-will. You don’t want to see anybody suffer. And you resolve on harmlessness. Harmlessness is close to non-ill-will. The text compares it to compassion. It’s basically going against the callous attitude that people have, “Well, I’m going to do what I want in front of people who get hurt.” That’s their problem. It’s not necessarily ill-will. But it’s a lack of caring, a lack of empathy. That’s what you want to get rid of. Then you start acting on those resolves to practice right speech, right action, right livelihood. As you live a life like that, then you realize you have to work on the mind. Because if you’re going to abide by the precepts, you have to watch out for your intentions. So any intentions that are going to be unskillful, if they haven’t arisen yet, you try to make sure they don’t arise. If they have arisen, you try to get rid of them. As for skillful intentions, you try to give rise to them. And when they’re there, then you try to develop them as far as they can go. Well, that’s right effort. Right effort requires mindfulness. So you can keep these things in mind as you go through life. Right mindfulness leads to right concentration. Sometimes these are described as two separate meditations. There’s mindfulness meditation, which just accepts things. There’s concentration meditation that gets focused. But actually the Buddha doesn’t describe them that way. Mindfulness, when it’s right, takes you right into the four jhanas. In fact, the topics of the four jhanas are the four frames of reference in mindfulness. And mindfulness itself is perfected when you get to the fourth jhana. Now, the fourth jhana there, of course, is still part of the path. That’s not where we’re headed for. It’s part of the path that takes us to where we want to go. And it’s not the case that you do one of the factors and then drop it to move on to the next one. The next one, they all begin to accumulate. But in terms of mastering, the Buddha says first you master the factors that have to do with virtue, which would be right speech, right action, right livelihood. You master those with stream entry. But when you master those, it’s not the case that you then start thinking about concentration. Once the concentration is perfected, then you start thinking about insight, discernment. Because to get to stream entry requires some concentration and discernment as well. I mean, the right concentration is part of the stream. As the Buddha said, when you’ve mastered the factors for virtue, you’ve already mastered a modicum of concentration and a modicum of discernment. In other words, you have some experience of doing these things well, but you haven’t totally mastered them yet. It’s the same when you had stream entry, excuse me, non-returning. You’ve mastered virtue, you’ve mastered concentration, but you also have some discernment, which means that you work on these things all together. You see this in the practice of concentration. You’ve got to have some discernment. In fact, the Buddha says, “Without discernment, there’s no jhana. Without jhana, there’s no discernment.” They help each other along. Instead of sitting here trying to get the mind still, it’s not just a matter of beating it down into stillness. You have to have some understanding of your mind, understanding of the object of your meditation, which of course would be the breath here, and how you relate. What’s the best way to relate? The description of right concentration includes rapture and pleasure, accompanied by direct thought and evaluation. It’s interesting that the feeling tone of the jhana plays the major role there. We’re getting to know our feelings and how we create them. At the same time, you’re thinking about how to get the mind to settle down with the breath. The direct thought would be keeping your focus on the topic, and the evaluation is trying to figure out how you do this well. As John Lee points out, that’s the beginning of discernment on this level. You’ve already had some practice in discernment and mastering the precepts, because you have to figure out how to get rid of intentions that would break the precepts. And there are challenges in observing the precepts. You have some information that you don’t want to share, especially not with people who would abuse it. So how do you keep from sharing that information without lying? That’s a challenge. You’ve got a house and pests in the house. How do you get the pests out of the house without killing them? Years back we had a discussion in one of the places where I teach about how to deal with ants and other pests in the house. We had an author there at the end who said, “Wow, we’ve had a very profound discussion tonight, haven’t we? Talking about ants.” I said, “Well, it’s part of learning to be profoundly empathetic. Think about all those beings out there. They want happiness. In fact, they’re defined by their desire for happiness. So you’ve got to take that into consideration if you’re going to have any kind of goodwill for them. You’ve got to focus on that. They desire happiness. You know, you’re not going to trample over their desire. Sometimes we have to deal with minutiae when we get into the precepts. It trains us to be careful. And, of course, that care gets carried over into the concentration. If you’re not careful about how you focus, you can create all kinds of problems with the breath, and it’s in the body focused too strong. You force the breath into places where it gets caught, or you force the blood into places where it gets caught. There’s a lot of pressure. You’ve got to be very careful about how you settle in. So you settle in in a way that allows the breath energies in the body and all the other elements to have some freedom. And you have to be sensitive to parts of the breath energy that are recalcitrant. In other words, no matter how much you try to breathe through them, they’re not letting you in. Usually it has to do with some psychological wound where one part of the mind doesn’t trust you. And so it puts up a shell. There are two ways of dealing with that. One is just to be very gentle all around it. Don’t go trying to go through it. Be very gentle all around it. And be very, very patient. This is one of our weaknesses in the West. We’re very impatient. We want to get things done right away so we can go on to the next thing. But some things are going to take time. And these parts of the mind that don’t trust you are often like that. You have to prove that you’re not going to abuse them anymore. Because that’s what they’re afraid of, that you have old habits of putting the breath energy around subconsciously. They don’t want to be a subject of that. That’s what they’re used to. So you have to show that you’ve changed your ways. At some point things may gradually open up. Another way to deal with them is instead of trying to breathe through them, breathe into them. Let them have the center of the breath, the part that’s most nourished by the breath in the body. See what that does. In other words, you’re gaining concentration by figuring things out. In terms of the basis for success, this would be the fourth one. Concentration fostered by analysis. Concentration basically fostered by discernment. Then there’s the issue of dealing with the feelings of pleasure that do come up. How do you relate to them in a way that you allow them to spread through the body, but you don’t wallow in them? You have to keep reminding yourself you’re not just here to be on the receiving end of those pleasurable feelings. You’re also creating them by your focus on the breath. It’s often the case that you can’t see the difference between the breath and the comfortable feeling. They seem to spread around together. Just maintain that role of being the producer. You’re here not to just receive the pleasure, you’re here to produce it by your focus on the breath. That way you get the full benefits of the state of concentration, which are to give you a sense of refreshment, a sense of rejuvenation, to have the energy to keep up with the path. It’s the same with issues of pain that come up as you’re trying to get the mind to settle down. You’re learning to see distinctions. The pain is one thing, your body is something else. But you’ve probably glommed the two together. How do you hold on to a perception that they really are separate things? A lot of this has to do with the messages that the mind sends to itself as it goes from moment to moment. This is one of the strange things about the mind. You think that the mind sees something, it doesn’t have to tell other parts of the mind. But there’s a conversation that goes back and forth, back and forth, and then gets sent on to the next moment, to the next moment. Watch out for this, be careful about that. We’re doing that all the time. So when we get down to seeing, well, what’s actually being said? Because a lot of this is in the subterranean parts of the mind, the parts that are not up on the surface. But you want to look into it. What are the messages that are being sent, and how intelligent are they? And where are they actually adding to the suffering? When you can see that, then it allows the mind to settle down even more. So it’s not the case that you’re going to perfect your virtue and then start thinking about concentration, and when the concentration is perfected, then start thinking about discernment. You’re not going to master virtue until you hit stream entry, and that’s going to require some concentration and discernment. You’re not going to master concentration without discernment either. So think of the path as a whole, w-h-o-l-e, with all the parts working together. This is one of Ajaan Mun’s comments that Ajaan Lee passed on to us. It’s not just the case that virtue fosters concentration, and concentration fosters discernment. The discernment helps your concentration and virtue. The concentration helps your virtue. They all work together. So make sure you’re practicing. Practice as an entire practice, because that’s how it grows and matures.

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