Discernment

April 2, 2019

John Lee once made the observation that if you see effects but without seeing their causes, it doesn’t count as discernment. Or if you see causes without seeing the effects, that doesn’t count as discernment either. You have to see them together to understand what comes from what or what leads to what. Because that kind of knowledge is useful. You can do something with it. In other words, you can get your actions more skillful, which is what the practice is all about. When the Buddhist started out, his basic teaching was the Four Noble Truths—cause and effect, unskillful causes lead to the end of suffering, unskillful causes lead to suffering. He gave some general explanations as to which kinds of causes, which kinds of actions, lead to suffering and which ones lead away. But you have to learn how to observe them in yourself for it to really hit home. Otherwise, there are lots of things we like to do. And we can tell ourselves that they lead to all kinds of nice consequences because we like them. We turn a blind eye to a lot of things that we’re actually creating with our actions that we like to do. There are other things that we don’t like to do, and we can give ourselves all kinds of reasons for not doing them, even though they might actually lead to something skillful. So as long as you’re lying to yourself like this, you’re not going to see anything. That’s one of the reasons why it is good to know the Buddhist teachings. There are a lot of people who feel they can simply close their eyes and be in the present moment, and that’s all they need to know, and that the texts are kind of useless. But then you can be swallowed up in delusion that way and not know that you’re deluded. You can go for years not noticing the things that you’re doing or the results of what you’re doing. So it’s good to have some pointers from the Buddha as to what kinds of things lead to suffering and which kinds of things lead away. Then you can look for yourself for those actions inside. If you see that there’s something you like that leads to suffering, you might want to give the Buddha the benefit of the doubt. Try giving it up for a while. And that’s for things you don’t like to do, but he says these are going to be good for you. You bite the bullet and say, “Well, give it a try.” This is what conviction is in the Buddhist teachings. It’s not a belief in unreasonable things. In fact, he says, “Reason is one of the bases for having conviction, that things seem to make sense, but it’s not proof that they’re true.” But in the Buddhist case, our conviction is that he knew what he was talking about, so let’s give it a try. Take it on as a working hypothesis. And then look at your actions. How do they measure up against what he has to say? In this case, you’re borrowing his discernment for the time being. It’s not yours yet, but it’s better than just going by your old ways of doing things. Nobody’s forcing you to take on the Buddhist teachings, but there is the fact that there is suffering. And that’s what pushes us. You hear so much about developing contentment as part of the practice, and there are a lot of things that you should learn to be content with, especially in terms of outside conditions. If it’s good enough to practice, it’s good enough. But you should not be content with the level of skill in your mind, as long as you see that there is suffering someplace inside the mind. You’ve got to say, “I don’t want to have this. I can’t rest content with this suffering. I’ve got to do something about it.” That’s what got the Buddha on the path and what gets everybody else on the path. It’s simply a matter of sorting out your ideas. As to what’s worth holding on to and what’s not. One of the reasons we practice meditation, getting the mind into concentration with a sense of well-being, is because it puts us in a better place to take a more objective look at our likes and dislikes. It also puts us in a better position to see clearly what’s connected to what, what is a cause, what is an effect, and what’s the connection between them. Because the best causes and effects are the ones that are easiest to see. And it has to do with your own actions. You know you did something, and you want to see the results inside yourself. Your thoughts, your words, your deeds, those actions as the causes, and the feelings of pleasure or pain that come about as a result. You see this in academia. Writers in academia tend to like to talk about themselves more than others. When I did the textbook, The Buddhist Religions, one of the criticisms that came from the readers was, “Where are the discussions of who says what, whose interpretation is what, and who argues with whom?” In other words, they wanted to talk about the field of Buddhist studies rather than talk about Buddhism. In that particular case, it seemed awfully self-serving. We know ourselves best, our actions best. The best things we know are the things we know most clearly are what we do. So the Buddha gives you some instructions. Do this. Focus on the breath. Stay with the breath. Breathe in a way that’s comfortable. Breathe in a way where you’re sensitive to the whole body. Try to breathe in a way that gives rise to a sense of fullness and refreshment. He poses those as challenges. He doesn’t tell you exactly how to do it. And John Lee gives some pointers on how to think of the breath energy to help develop a sense of breathing that’s comfortable and also to develop the ability to allow that sense of comfort to spread and fill the body. But even there, there’s a lot of observation you have to do for yourself. It’s precisely in doing the observation for yourself that your discernment develops. You say, “When I do this, this comes about. When I do that, that comes about.” You begin to see patterns. And that’s the discernment. Because then, once you’ve seen the pattern, you can take advantage of it. You realize you do have the choice. You don’t have to suffer. You’re not just stuck with the present moment as a given. The present moment is something you shape. And you can learn how to shape it well, both for the sake of the present and also for the sake of the future. You learn how to shape it so well that you can go beyond suffering entirely. That’s the skill the Buddha promises. But for a lot of us, it takes a lot of practice. It takes a lot of energy to look at our actions consistently and that the results end, to admit what’s actually going on and not let our likes and dislikes get in the way. That’s part of the battle. But it’s when you begin to realize that a lot of your likes and dislikes are lying to you. In other words, they’re things you like to do, they’re fun to do, they’re entertaining, they’re interesting, but they’re going to have a bad effect. And if the mind lies to you, saying, “Well, the cause and the effect are not connected,” or, “It doesn’t really matter,” or, “There’s no way you can avoid that kind of pain,” or, “You have to do it this way,” watch out for those voices. They’re in your mind, but they don’t have your well-being in mind. At least, they don’t have your long-term well-being. They have a very short-term well-being. But when you realize the mind is lying to you, that’s when you can step back and begin to see things as they’re actually happening, regardless of your likes and dislikes. When you have that sense of well-being that comes from the concentration, you’re in a better mood to give up the things that you are attached to and to understand what attachment is. We had a little bit of discussion this afternoon on the topic of attachment and affection are not the same thing. The kind of clinging the Buddha is talking about is when your happiness has to feed on something, has to feed on a particular relationship, has to feed on having things a particular way. That’s where you’re going to suffer. As for simple affection, that’s not necessarily going to be suffering. In fact, acts of kindness, acts of goodwill, acts of compassion—these are sustenance for the mind, a healthy sustenance. But you want to focus on them as your sustenance rather than on them. Focus on the relationship or the other person or the pet or the having things a certain way. Look for your nourishment in what you do rather than having things outside be a certain way. Focus on, again, the causes. Have the right attitude towards your actions. Have the right attitude towards the results that you’re going to get from your actions. Sometimes I say, “Don’t be attached to results.” The only way that makes sense is if you say, “I want to do what I like to do, and I want the results to come out the way I want them to come out.” That kind of attachment is going to give you trouble. But attachment to getting things right, getting the results right, and then being willing to do whatever it takes to get them right. That’s a good attitude to have to the outcome. After all, this is what discernment is all about—knowing what gets good results and being wise enough to do what’s needed to get those good results. That’s the kind of discernment, that’s the kind of wisdom that has meaning—the wisdom that knows why something is happening. And all the activities of the mind that go into that—virtue, concentration, in addition to figuring things out, and also figuring out the obstacles in the mind, the likes and the dislikes that get in the way of doing what’s right—all of that counts as discernment. That’s the kind of discernment we’re working for. The discernment that really does make a difference in our lives.

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